



Strengthening the Capacity of Women in Community Forest User Group (CFUG) on Fire Hazard Management

Implemented by Dalit Women's Right Forum (DWRF) and DanChurchAid (DCA)
Location: Sudurpaschim, Kailali District, Nepal
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3.1 Background

In Kailali District, Nepal, the Indigenous Tharu community and Dalit hill migrants have been marginalised for centuries, despite being a significant portion of the population. These communities heavily depend on community forests for subsistence and livelihoods, yet they are often excluded from decision-making forums, which are dominated by elites, mostly men. The Tharu and Dalit communities in Nepal, particularly those living in climate-vulnerable areas, face heightened risks due to the increasing frequency and intensity of climate-induced disasters such as floods, fire hazards, heatwaves, and droughts. Forest fires in Kailali District recorded the highest number of forest fires in Sudurpaschim, with severe impacts on the environment and communities. In May 2019, a single fire destroyed 40% of the district's forest cover.

Project Objectives:

The project focused on strengthening the capacity of women members in Community Forest User Groups (CFUG) from Tharu and Dalit Communities on Fire Hazard Management Project. The project significantly strengthened community capacity for forest fire prevention and control through a series of awareness and training programmes. Orientations on forest fire prevention and management were provided to CFUG officials, with women accounting for 80% of participants, as well as to local government representatives. During these programmes, local government representatives expressed their commitment to allocate budgets and implement plans and programmes related to forest fire management in the future.

Key Activities:

- Strengthening community technical capacity in dealing with forest fires
- Building institutional capacity of CFUGs
- Training and awareness creation among local government representatives
- Development of a forest fire resource manual
- Construction of fire belts and recharge ponds (rainwater harvesting)
- Multi Hazard risk assessment, and
- Advocacy (budget allocation and adaptation of resource manual)

Community-level training, including practical exercises, was also conducted for women to enhance their skills in forest fire prevention and control. The training activities were coordinated through ERI Consultancy, whose experts had received advanced forest fire management training in Australia and transferred this knowledge to local communities. As part of the project, ERI Consultancy developed a forest fire resource manual and provided it to the Dalit Women's Rights Forum. The manual was subsequently distributed to community forest leaders and is currently being used as a key reference resource for orienting community forest user group officials.

The project also supported the construction of recharge ponds and fire control lines in community forests in coordination with the CFUGs and the Forest Division Office, and distributed essential firefighting equipment. Training on fire prevention and control has been systematically conducted with elected officials, stakeholders, and CFUGs, incorporating practical, hands-on exercises to strengthen response capacity.



Strengthening the capacity of women CFUG members from Tharu and Dalit Communities on fire hazard management.

Photo credit: DWRF project photos

These interventions contributed directly to reducing forest fire risks. For example, a firebreak established under the project successfully prevented the spread of a forest fire in Ratna Community Forest. Similarly, when a fire occurred in the Dalit Community Forest, it was effectively controlled using the firefighting materials provided through the project. These achievements demonstrate the project's positive contribution to improving community preparedness and resilience against forest fires.

The project undertook capacity-building initiatives to strengthen institutional and community competencies and conducted multi-hazard risk assessments to support evidence-based planning and decision-making. Traditional leadership structures (Valmansa) were used to ensure culturally grounded approaches, local ownership and to influence the need for better inclusion. The project also worked with local environmental journalists to enhance awareness and communication on climate and risk issues. Efforts were also made to facilitate inclusive stakeholder engagement to strengthen coordination and partnerships. The project also aimed to create awareness and reduce Gender-Based Violence through gender-transformative approaches, including male engagement and community sensitisation.

Project Reach:

This project was implemented in 25 CFUGs spanning five wards of Kailari Rural Municipality in Sudurpashchim Province, Nepal. All 25 CFUGs are actively engaged in capacity-building initiatives on multi-disaster preparedness, addressing hazards such as floods, landslides, earthquakes, windstorms, heat waves, cold waves, hailstorms, and forest fires. The project initiatives included 27 CFUG leaders, 24 local government representatives and 174 CFUG and community members – including Indigenous communities and youth (to construct the fire lines).

3.2 Changes due to the Project

Collective community stewardship of forest resources can generate environmental, economic, and social benefits: The Khaurahawa Shiva Community Forest User Group, located in Ward No. 7 of Chhatakpur Basanta, Kailari Rural Municipality, has been actively engaged in environmental conservation and sustainable forest management. Established in 2010 (2067 BS), the community forest covers an area of 98.79 hectares and is used by 125 households with a total population of 722 people, including 351 women and 371 men. The forest is managed by a 13-member executive committee, comprising of 8 women and 5 men, under the leadership of Chairman Mr. Lekhrum Chaudhary.

Engaging male champions or local leaders to counter patriarchal barriers was also a strategy used to endorse and pave the way for women's leadership. DWRF trained and mobilised 30 male champions within the CFUG networks to actively reshape restrictive patriarchal norms and raise community awareness to prevent GBV.

Initially, the area consisted of two separate community forests Khaurahawa and Shiva which were merged in 2010 (2067 BS) to form the current Khaurahawa Shiva CFUG. Prior to its establishment, displaced families from Bhuiyaphata village had encroached upon the forest following the 2006 monsoon, leading to severe environmental degradation, forest encroachment, and threats to wildlife. These settlers were later removed and the area was formally protected as a community forest.

The forest is rich in native species such as *sal* and *sisau* (Botanical Names: *Shorea robusta* and *Dalbergia sissoo*) which have been recognised by the Government of Nepal as a spring corridor. A sub-division forest office has been established nearby to support conservation efforts. However, challenges such as population pressure, forest fires, encroachment, road construction impacts, and declining groundwater levels have continued to threaten the ecosystem.



Chairman (CFUG) Mr. Lekhrum Chaudhary who is also a part of the traditional leadership structures (Valmansa) that supported better inclusion.

Photo credit:
DWRF project photos

In response, several development and conservation initiatives have been implemented. This included the DWRF's activities under the SIDRRA Project that was launched in July, that carried out awareness programmes on environmental protection, forest fire prevention and groundwater conservation activities.

While the SIDRRA Project has allocated only NPR 25,000 for the construction of one recharge pond, the Khaurahawa Shiva CFUG and the Suiti CFUG have invested up to NPR 100,000 (including in-kind support) to construct the recharge ponds. These ponds were constructed through a joint initiative between Khaurahawa Shiva and Suiti CFUGs along with the development of picnic spots to promote eco-tourism and sustainable livelihoods.

According to Chairman of the CFUG, Mr. Lekhram Chaudhary, the proper protection and utilisation of community forests can generate multiple benefits, including income from leaf-plate (duna-tapari) production, employment opportunities for women, fish farming in ponds, recreational development, and plantation around recharge ponds. Planned activities also include the establishment of yoga and meditation centres, children's play areas, water storage for fire control, and small dams to reduce flooding risks.

Overall, the Khaurahawa Shiva CFUG demonstrates how collective community stewardship of forest resources can generate environmental, economic, and social benefits. Through sustainable management of land, water, and forest resources, CFUGs have significant potential to enhance livelihoods while contributing to environmental conservation.

Increasing participatory forest management: The project activities made a conscious effort to increase the participation and representation of individuals in community forestry governance – from diverse castes, marginalised groups, economically disadvantaged, and socially excluded communities and women from all these groups.

At present, women are being democratically elected to leadership positions in CFUGs through general assemblies. Most CFUGs are actively engaging in activities such as public hearings, financial audits, and social audits. These measures help ensure transparent and accountable management of forest resources while involving the community in decision-making. Kailari Rural Municipality has formed a municipality-level coordination committee to support and coordinate CFUGs. At present, all community forests in the municipality are affiliated with this committee, promoting unified management and collaboration among the groups. In addition, the CFUG Coordination Committee, established in Kailari Rural Municipality, is advancing the development of standardised procedures and guidelines for effective community forest management.



CFUG community members work together to construct the firelines and recharge pond

Photo credit: DWRF project photos

Proactive action towards preparedness: Following fire prevention and control training, CFUG members are actively constructing fire lines to reduce forest fire risks, with strong engagement from local governments and stakeholders. These fire lines act as barriers that limit the spread of fire, enhancing forest safety and resilience.

To enhance forest fire preparedness CFUGs also constructed recharge ponds within community forests. These ponds serve as a reliable water source for controlling fires, contributing to overall forest safety and resilience.

Collaboration with the Forest Division Office has improved, enabling timely approval of initiatives such as recharge pond reconstruction. At the same time, gender inclusion has strengthened, with more women participating in decision-making and leadership roles within CFUGs. CFUGs are also implementing more inclusive budgeting practices to address the needs of vulnerable and marginalised groups.

Community driven welfare programmes: In Kailari Rural Municipality Ward No. 4, the Ward Office partnered with the DWRF to distribute warm blankets to marginalised households during the cold season. Training was conducted with the active participation of Dalits, women, and other marginalised groups. The community forest users committee provided nutritious food to marginalised pregnant women. Under the RESIST project, trained male champions are working within CFUGs to raise awareness among men and promote behaviours that help prevent gender-based violence in the community.

3.3 Challenges

- In the event of a fire outbreak in a community forest, ordinary firefighting equipment is often insufficient to effectively control and contain the fire. Due to factors such as difficult terrain, rapid fire spread, and limited accessibility, managing forest fires requires specialised and costly equipment along with trained personnel. Without such resources, the risk of extensive environmental damage and loss of biodiversity increases significantly.

3.4 Lessons Learnt

- The construction of firebreaks – that can be done by local communities with the support of forest management officials – as a preventive measure plays a crucial role in limiting the spread of forest fires. By creating gaps in vegetation, firebreaks help contain fires within a defined area, thereby reducing the risk of extensive damage to forest ecosystems and surrounding resources.
- The construction of a recharge pond within a community forest can serve multiple purposes. The stored water can be utilised for firefighting during forest fire incidents, enhancing local response capacity. In addition, the pond can support fish farming, providing livelihood opportunities for the community. The water resource can also be used for various other needs, contributing to sustainable forest management and improving the overall resilience of the ecosystem and local communities.
- While implementing its community forest-based project, the DWRF has also been actively conducting awareness programmes addressing GBV, domestic violence, and caste-based discrimination faced by women within CFUGs. These efforts aim to promote social inclusion, empower marginalised women, and foster a more equitable and safer environment in community forest governance.



Joint discussion of CFUGs on constructing recharge ponds and developing picnic spots to promote eco-tourism and sustainable livelihoods.

Photo credit: DWRF project photos

3.5 Way Forward

This project DWRF implemented under SIDRRA brought many new insights of DRR; specially dealing with forest fires. Therefore, the project has acted as a pilot in many aspects. Therefore, the learnings provide a replicable model (in community-based governance) with further research and modifications of the model. The way forward should involve implementing a few more pilot projects to come up with a refined replicable model.

When implementing programmes in community forests, addressing a broader range of environmental and disaster-related challenges, such as floods, storms, cold waves, heat waves, epidemics, and earthquakes, can significantly enhance overall effectiveness. Rather than focusing solely on forest fires, adopting a more integrated and multi-hazard approach strengthens community resilience, improves preparedness, and ensures more comprehensive and sustainable outcomes for both the ecosystem and local communities.

CFUGs are well established and continue beyond a project phase. The CFUGs are actively strengthening transparency and accountability by conducting annual public hearings and public audits of their activities. They prepare and implement annual action plans that prioritise support for poor households, women, Dalits, Indigenous peoples, and other marginalised communities. Additionally, by regularly paying annual renewal taxes for forest management, these groups demonstrate a growing sense of ownership and responsibility and continued engagement in this sector. The CFUG Coordination Committee is also actively advocating with local government authorities to develop and formalise procedures for effective community forest management. This collective commitment is contributing to improved governance and advancing the long-term sustainability of community forest management.



Participation in community forestry, women's involvement in decision-making processes

Photo credit: DWRF project photos

The Strengthening Inclusive Disaster Risk Governance for Climate Resilience in Asia (SIDRRA) project was funded by the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency (Sida). It was implemented by a consortium comprising the International Rescue Committee (IRC), the Asian Disaster Reduction and Response Network (ADRRN), and Duryog Nivaran (DN) to strengthen resilience among at-risk communities in Asia and amplify local voices in disaster risk governance. Under this project, DN supported several network members – the Institute of Disaster Management and Vulnerability Studies (IDMVS) in Bangladesh, Practical Action Consulting, and Dalit Women Rights Forum (DWRF) who worked with DanChurchAid in Nepal, and Hari Welfare Association in Pakistan — to operationalise inclusive, local-level disaster risk governance.

[From Risk to Readiness: Community-Driven Local-Level Disaster Risk Governance](#) compiles case studies and lessons from this work, strengthening the evidence base for inclusive local-level governance and adding to the wider knowledge on what works, for whom, and why.

Each case study is also available as a standalone publication.



Scan for the Document:
From Risk to Readiness: Community-Driven Local-level
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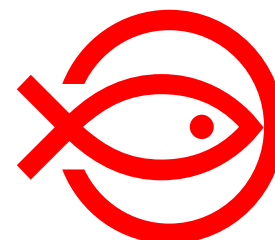
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**From Risk to Readiness:
Community Driven Local-Level Disaster Risk Governance**