Himachal Pradesh Forest Sector Review

IIED in collaboration with the Himachal Pradesh Forest Department.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The purpose of the Forest Sector Review

Himachal Pradesh's forests, and the people dependent on them, are experiencing new types of change, at ever-increasing rates. Yet the policy and institutional framework has not changed to the same degree, with the result that systems for ensuring that all needs for forest goods and services are met are now inadequate. Recognising this, the Himachal Pradesh Forest Department (HPFD) called for a comprehensive Forest Sector Review (FSR). The Review aims to provide a basis of information and consensus on which to build the future policies and strategies of the HPFD and other key institutions, so that they meet the needs of key forest stakeholders and ensure sustainable management of forest resources, integrating forest sector planning with socio-economic development. The FSR looks at the whole *sector* from many stakeholders' perspectives – and not merely at forests from a foresters' perspective, or at the HPFD from an officer's perspective.

Hence the FSR looks forward to a sustainable future, and not merely backward at the impacts of previous policies. It points to the need for basic principles for the sector's future, for a strengthened and participatory institutional framework at state and local levels, and for shared new policy objectives.

The multi-stakeholder, multi-disciplinary process of preparing the FSR

The FSR has been based firmly on a twin-track approach of multi-stakeholder consultations and multi-disciplinary analysis. This has helped not only to get better information from key informants, but also to stimulate a strategic series of informed debates between these stakeholders on the policy and institutional issues affecting the forest sector.

Since the FSR serves as a 'bridge' between understanding the present and defining a future vision, it employed an analytical framework which can assess the current situation in relation to possible future, broader needs for sustainable forest management (SFM). The analysis has not been confined to strict 'forestry' concerns, but has given equal attention to cross-sectoral and livelihood-level issues.

The Review encompassed a range of stakeholder meetings, initially with HPFD and Himachal Pradesh State Forest Corporation (HPSFC) officers at all levels, then extending to include all other forest stakeholders. During the course of the FSR there were three major multi-stakeholder meetings; participants included village representatives, forest officers, NGOs, academics, Secretaries from the Government of HP, Forest Minister and the Chief Minister. The process of gradually broadening participation ensured accuracy of the FSR findings, practicality of recommendations, and wide 'ownership' of the vision.

The FSR process might continue on a regular basis - because consensus cannot be reached on all issues and options in one year, and experimental approaches will be needed, demanding subsequent review and adaptation by stakeholders. The FSR is a precursor to ongoing strategic planning, and is thought to be a leading example of such processes in India.

Stakeholder discussions revealed the need for particular analysis in several key areas, and specialist work was undertaken on:
- the diversity of local forest stakeholders and their values;

- the proliferation of, and links between, local (village-level) institutions;
- biodiversity conservation and use;
- economic valuation of forest goods and services;
- legal issues; and
- the status and adequacy of land use policy.

Top issues

The FSR analyses and discussions raise three groups of related issues:

- Participation in forest management for livelihood needs
- Increasing the goods and services available through improving forest management
- Governance, laws and policy coherence to achieve the above

These issues need to be resolved if we are to move to a sustainable forest sector which meets the needs of stakeholders. For each issue, the FSR attempts to assess the situation and identify major needs for change.

Participation in forest management for livelihood needs*:*

Most rural people in HP use significant quantities of forest goods and services, for some of which there is no available substitute, although few people are totally dependent on forest products. However, some local stakeholders are highly dependent upon forest products for much of their livelihood, currently at a subsistence level. In some places there is high potential for building forest-based enterprises in production of forest goods, tourism, etc. Furthermore, a shortage of forest environmental services – which provide critical support to hill farming systems as well as to domestic water supply – entrenches poverty.

The challenge is how to build a livelihood-first approach onto what has been an essentially forest-first institutional structure and operating procedure. This entails developing an enabling framework for participatory forest management on top of an existing regulatory framework which did not anticipate participation. There is a need for legal frameworks that provide meaningful and secure rights to benefit from and manage local forests, and that are flexible enough to allow real local choices that reflect local needs and aspirations.

Village communities' awareness of their stake in the protection and continuation of forest cover is increasing. This is evident from the village institutions that are slowly proliferating. There have been significant efforts to improve people's participation in recent years, notably the spread of nearly 360 Village Forest Development Societies under '*Sanjhi Van Yojna*', HP's programme of Joint Forest Management (JFM). Although these and other forms of village forest institution are yet to mature, develop effective and accountable leadership, and become independent entities, their evolution is widely thought to have brought about an overall increased focus on forest issues.

However the FSR identified challenges within the community/ local-level organisations themselves, with relations between them, and with their relations with the HPFD. For example:
- There is a need for greater equity within village institutions, to overcome the tendency towards concentration of powerful groups.
- Given the proliferation of community organisations concerned with forestry (which was not reviewed in a comparative manner until the work of the FSR), there is a need for clarity and coordination concerning their respective rights, responsibilities and objectives, and their relations with each other and with other institutions.
- The sustainability of project-sponsored village forest institutions is under question, which emphasises the importance of local 'ownership' of the institution .
- There remains a clear need to efficiently delegate regulatory functions to village institutions.

The appropriate relationship between village forest institutions and local government in the form of Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs) has been a subject of debate since the start of JFM in India. FSR consultations and surveys indicate that in HP as well, opinions vary as to the extent to which the link between village forest institutions and PRIs should be formalised. PRIs emerge as a potential common point of intervention, due to their presence throughout HP and their constitutional nature, where the possibility of convergence of all local village level institutions including forest institutions is strongest. The HPFD has indicated its futuristic vision to integrate its institutions with PRIs. However, it is important to ensure that there is a locally acceptable balance of rights and responsibilities.

Increasing the goods and services available through improving forest management:

The FSR economic valuation study points to the huge values of HP forests for – in descending order – watershed functions, timber growing stock, carbon storage, biodiversity and eco-tourism services. The key issue is how to realise these high values in practice, at what cost, and who shares the costs and benefits.

- Himachal Pradesh is one of the most important states in India for biodiversity. There are still virgin primary forests left; IUCN considers the region to be one of the world's priority conservation areas; and some of HP's species (notably pheasants) are of global importance. But there is a need for rationalising protected areas for more efficient coverage, and improved management and planning to integrate biodiversity conservation and management in production forests and village livelihood system forests.
- The role of HP forests as a major production centre for water supplies that extend beyond the state to serve the cities and agriculture of the Indo-Gangetic plain, is quite widely appreciated in HP. There is a need for specialised watershed management knowledge and financial incentives to pay for management.
- The gathering of non-timber forest products (NTFPs) can be an important activity for low-income groups in particular, yet there are strong differences of opinion about who should be able to access NTFPs. Essentially there is a need to determine where privatisation or community control is appropriate, and where nationalisation is justified.
- Cattle numbers in HP are roughly equivalent to the human population. Whilst unregulated grazing in some areas has far exceeded the carrying capacity, it is also accepted that in other areas, grazing is a good use of upland forest. There is a need to encourage economically productive cattle to be zoned in the right kinds of forest.
- Himachal Pradesh attracts many tourists, both national and international, and one of the most significant 'unique selling points' of HP tourism is the forest asset. There is potential to build on this such that tourism is compatible with SFM and local livelihoods, and so that tourism revenue can be ploughed back into the HP forest sector in order to pay for conserving the forest landscape resource.
- Timber production involves some contentious issues: there is still debate as to whether the green felling ban should be lifted, which adds a significant element of uncertainty to planning future forest sector strategies. There may be scope for some degree of 'privatisation' of production to small farmers. Timber Distribution rights are also contentious: the rates are very low and there is general agreement that some modification is necessary; however the political challenges may outweigh the legal difficulties.
- Most forests should produce more than just one of these goods and services; thus there is a need to sustain all forest goods and services through integrated protection and management strategies. This requires:
  - keeping track of the values of forest land: better information on forest resources, forest stakeholders, economic and financial values of forest goods and services is needed within an integrated, strategic forest information system.
  - partnership approaches so that forests can produce multiple goods and services: this includes some redefinition of roles between state and village bodies, backed up by appropriate regulations and penalties, and 'zoning'.

Governance, laws and policy coherence to achieve the above*:*

Sustainable forest management requires legal and policy frameworks that reassure all those who invest their time, effort and money that the benefit of their efforts will not be lost due to illegal harvesting, exporting, clearing or other harmful and illicit activities. There is a need to strike an effective balance between the enabling and controlling functions of these instruments – as they can be mutually reinforcing.

- The lack of a land use policy in which the place of forests is clear and secure contributes to many of the clashes concerning the role of forests, forest removal and afforestation. Forest classification currently reflects neither actual forest cover nor livelihood uses, and there is poor demarcation even of important forests on the ground.
- Non-forest sector policies, institutions and markets can have significant forestry implications. Whilst there has, to date, been little coordination between different sectoral departments, forest policy can no longer be a narrow affair of forest authorities alone, and the FSR has attempted to actively open up to non-forest interests.
- Participatory governance is only just developing at both the local and the state level. At the state level, there are no regular consultation and review procedures for HP state forest policy – FSR is a first, and something of its type may need to be applied on a continuing basis. At local levels, the many JFM experiments offer good lessons.

Summary of recommendations

The FSR studies and consultations have revealed a convergence of opinion towards four principles for making the transition to SFM, and a system for achieving SFM based on ten related policy objectives.

Four key principles for SFM in HP

These may be adopted as a basis for defining policies and programmes towards sustainable forest management in HP:

➢ **Multiple forest values***:* Recognise the many forest values which sustain local livelihoods and economic growth, from energy, food and fibre production to cultural values and environmental services, and work towards realising these values to enable continuous flows of benefits for different stakeholders.
➢ **Multiple forest stakeholders***:* Recognise there are many stakeholders involved in the forest sector – from those dependent on forests for their subsistence needs, to state-level institutions charged with looking after HP's forests, to national and international stakeholders. Good policies and programmes will give them access to information and decision-making processes, and will emphasise participation in sharing the costs and benefits of forest use.
➢ **Changing conditions***:* Recognise that economic, environmental, social and institutional circumstances and needs are changing, increasingly rapidly, both within HP and outside. This means that policies and programmes need to be capable of regular review and adaptation, and should include a precautionary approach to protect important forest assets.
➢ **The need for a lead agency to coordinate the transition to SFM**: Recognise that all stakeholders expect the HPFD, as the recognised authority, to take up this role, which will therefore require considerable support. But also that this will need to be complemented by a regular, equitable participatory system through which stakeholders themselves can meet,

debate strategic issues, consider optional solutions, and form partnerships – facilitated by the HPFD.

Ultimately, these principles imply a significant re-negotiation of forest stakeholder roles, that are both realistic and acceptable to all. This is already a recognised need. However, this cannot take place until there is a shared vision of SFM, based on a participatory policy process. This re-negotiation is likely to signal a significant institutional change process over the coming years (which may even be the main outcome of the FSR). In other words, a process of decentralisation of forestry is needed to handle local complexities, which also needs to be centralised enough to ensure greater policy coherence within and outside the state.

The four key principles are amplified below in ten inter-related policy objectives:[1]

1. **Institute a multi-stakeholder HP Forest Consultative Forum**. The establishment of an HP Forest Consultative Forum would create a platform for continued discussion of issues such as those raised during the FSR. It is proposed that the Forum be positioned at a high level. It should include good representation of all the stakeholder groups, especially those at local level which are most dependent on forests, and sectors with a strong economic interest in forests e.g. tourism and water supply. It would benefit from being composed of progressive, expert, respected individuals rather than *ex officio* members. Such a Forum is required to enable both 'horizontal' coordination – strategic coherence between sectors, and 'vertical' coordination – linking villages to the centre in terms of improving both policy and its implementation. Thus a 'tiered' approach of local forest fora, building on village forest institutions and federations of them, would be one option for ensuring the state forum deals with real local interests. The Forum approach is central to most of the following other recommendations.

2. **Cross-sectoral coherence towards SFM, with an early emphasis on agreeing criteria and indicators (C&I) of SFM for Himachal Pradesh**. Economic development and rural livelihoods in forested areas are the concern of many departments, and not just the Forest Department. There is a need for greater inter-sectoral coherence and coordination between departments both at the state level and at the village level – and experiments in effective and workable mechanisms to support this. One option to develop, in a participatory manner, core principles, criteria and indicators for SFM, and to apply them to government, private and community forest operations and to environmental impact assessments of activities that might impact on forests.

3. **Strengthen village-level institutions.** The various types of village forest institution all hold great promise for fulfilling local needs from forests and – provided the regulations and incentives are right – for contributing to the production of state, national and global forest values as well. However there is need for:
    *   harmonisation of the many types of local institutions, whilst allowing for local differences and innovation;
    *   institutional arrangements to support coordination rather than conflict between neighbouring village forest institutions;
    *   clarification of the roles and linkages between village forest institutions and PRIs, based on analysis of what has been working well;
    *   mechanisms for monitoring and safeguarding the interests of marginalised groups within the village institution; and
    *   wider scope to be given to villages in terms of the land use and forest management decisions they are empowered to make.

4. **Liberalise forestry off-reserve, i.e. plantation/ farm forestry on private lands.** The HPFD needs to undertake a technical support/ enabling role, encouraging a thriving private sector to produce forest goods efficiently [2]. Private sector codes of practice might be encouraged, based on C&I for SFM (above), and forms of independent certification that forests are actually

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[1] These ten policy objectives are not in order of priority.

managed to these C&I might ultimately be considered. However, certain controls are also needed as a complement to such a voluntary approach.

5. **Improve investment in the public benefits from forests.** In general, state forestry should focus on public benefits; a case could be made for the HPSFC to invest in improving the quantity and quality of public forest assets. This would mean ensuring HPSFC is a pioneer in best-practice forestry which includes environmental and social benefits. Thus HPSFC should be demonstrators of any new HP C&I for SFM.

6. **Undertake organisational change and capacity development in the HPFD to support other stakeholders, and especially village-level institutions, to take up sustainable forestry roles.** The HPFD will need continued support to be able to work in partnership with all the institutions which should be playing a part in SFM. Its roles may shift towards analysis, advice, facilitation and monitoring – rather than a heavy field enforcement presence. Capacity building will be needed to enable the HPFD to work in partnership with other institutions, as well as to ensure participation of all levels within the Department. **An HPFD Change Management Steering Committee** is suggested to help the HPFD through the process of change over the next few years. It should report to the HP Forest Consultative Forum, to ensure that changes reflect the principle of the HPFD supporting other stakeholders' needs.

7. **Develop a vision for balanced land use.** At the state level, the challenge is to establish what types of forest are needed to meet current and future needs for forest goods and services, where they are (whether state or other land), how to encourage their development if there is not enough, and what legal backing may be necessary for the different forest management categories of a 'permanent forest estate'. The HP State Land Use and Wasteland Development Board (SLUWDB) could be empowered to administer the necessary multi-disciplinary procedures (possibly as a wing of the State Planning Department).

   Balanced forest use at the *local level* could also be ensured through: documentation of local customary practices for integrated use, as well as C&I for SFM that are developed in light of this knowledge base; extension of JFM/ SVY to dense forests with rich sources of NTFPs; and participation of people in negotiated extraction from protected areas.

8. **Ensure biodiversity values are factored better into land use.** A better system of protected areas is called for, to meet the requirements of the Convention on Biodiversity and to capitalise upon tourism and scientific potentials; this would include certain area rationalisations and links between particular protected areas that have been identified in the FSR biodiversity study. However, biodiversity conservation outside protected areas also needs to be improved: this might include encouragement of traditional land husbandry practices, complemented by incentives where necessary. For HPFD, HPSFC and private operators who are involved in production forestry, there is a need for guidelines and training in the latest approaches to biodiversity conservation within forest management.

9. **Develop a transparent information system on forests, to inform stakeholders.** It is recommended that a basic **Forest Information System (FIS)** is established. It should be accessible to all stakeholders and ensure a flow of good, quality information reflecting the overall vision for HP's forest sector, whilst cutting back on unnecessary information. This could produce a regular 'state of the forests and forest stakeholders' report. An FIS should improve transparency; but for particularly contentious or pressing issues, a further option to consider might be to constitute an independent **Forest Watch Group** which would also make its information freely available. Ultimately, a broader land information system might be desirable.

10. **Greatly improve efforts to spread awareness of forest values, objectives, rights and responsibilities, increasing political commitment to SFM.** The findings and

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[2] 'Private sector' includes individual farmers, community groups, JFM groups, etc. as well as the corporate private sector.

recommendations of this FSR need to be widely disseminated and feedback sought. Mechanisms for assuring public review and comment on major new plans for the forest sector would lead to greater public awareness and 'ownership' of new rules and laws, increasing acceptance and improving compliance. Improved political commitment and institutional changes are key needs, but will require a continued process to achieve them.

Next steps

Short-term actions, milestones and indicators of progress are suggested for each of the above objectives. The next major step is to draft a new forest policy and institutional development strategy, based on the FSR findings and recommendations, and on further stakeholder feedback on them. (For this reason, a feedback form is included in this document). It is recommended that the current FSR 'Core Team' be kept on, and augmented with other stakeholders, to manage this process. By 2001, it is hoped that the Forest Consultative Forum will be established in order to provide the 'centre' of a new participatory institutional system in HP: thus many of the next steps should be focused on setting this Forum up in an equitable and efficient manner.