Flare 2018 Annual Meeting Abstracts

**Staddon, Sam;** University of Edinburgh
sam.staddon@ed.ac.uk
Authors: Staddon, Sam, University of Edinburgh

**Title: Freedom to learn from ‘failure’: Understanding and delivering equity and equality in Nepal’s community forests**

The promises of community forestry programmes to promote equity and equality often fail to materialise in practice. This ‘paradox of participation’ (Lund 2015) has plagued development professionals and inspired academic critique for decades, suggesting an acute need to learn far more from/about this ‘failure’. This paper presents insights from research exploring how development and forestry practitioners come to know and understand issues of equity and equality in Nepal’s community forests – and how these are/are not delivered through their programmes and projects. It draws attention to sources of knowledge and understanding (disciplinary, organisational, personal, public) and to how development practices (project development, delivery, monitoring, reporting, funding etc.) structure their inclusion or omission, with particular consequences for community forestry outcomes. It seeks to expose the opportunities for – and constraints to – critical and reflective learning around equity and equality, and ultimately the freedom to learn from/about ‘failure’ to deliver these in practice.

Theoretically informed by anthropologies and geographies of development and forestry, the paper draws on doctoral research in Nepal during 2007 and 2008 with Community Forest User Groups in the Middle-Hills, and from on-going interviews with practitioners and ethnographic engagements in Kathmandu during 2017 and 2018. I expect to show increasing frustration amongst practitioners with regard the rigidity of programme and project design, delivery, and outcome reporting; leaving little room for the inclusion of multiple knowledges nor to learn from past ‘failures’. I also expect to show that amidst this frustration exist innovative practitioners and projects who/which with less funding or reporting constraints, experience a freedom to focus on underlying processes involved in promoting equity and equality (including intersectional subjectivities, power and authority). This research contributes to scholarly debates by exploring the practices and processes that perpetuate a failure to learn from the past, but also those that transform interventions and thus futures for Nepal’s community forests. This has practical significance in demanding the attention and action of those funding development interventions towards enabling reflective learning. Only by acknowledging and learning from the ‘paradox of participation’, its historical antecedents and on-going (re)creation, can community forestry deliver equity and equality.