Constitutionality manifestations and potential implications for forest co-management in the Lower Mustang District of Nepal.

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Community-based forest management (CBFM) models have a long history in Nepal - considered to have one of the well-established forms of decentralized management in the Global South. However, a large body of literature on CBFM focused on community and leasehold forestry, with very little attention on the co-management model. Although co-management decision-making arrangements and outcomes have been fairly documented, the conditions under which meaningful bottom-up institution building processes are activated to support co-management, currently account for only a negligible number of studies. We contribute to bridge this knowledge gap from the constitutionality perspective. As a recent theoretical construct, constitutionality does not refer to legally established political constitutions for states and organizations; it rather connotes pro-active and strategic participation in the design of local institutions negotiated in settings with heterogeneous stakeholders focused upon the use of natural resources (Haller et al. 2016; Haller et al. 2018). This theoretical construct still begs for edification through diverse empirical studies. Using the case of Nepal, this paper seeks to answer the following questions: To what extent do the six constitutionality principles manifest in the forest co-management process? What are the potential implications of constitutionality in co-management? In what ways can the effective enforcement of these principles (re)orient the co-management process? Five focus group discussions and 10 key informant interviews were conducted in five villages within the Annapurna Conservation Area – the largest protected area in Nepal. This information was further supported by document/archival analysis, and workshop discussions with the National Trust for Nature Conservation (NTNC) and District Forest Officers (DFOs). We further employed narratives, framework and thematic analyses to discuss the manifestations of constitutionality principles, and their potential roles to activate meaningful bottom-up co-management processes. Despite the observed potentials for the six principles to support the process, we argue that emphasis on emic perceptions, the activation of the role of outside catalyzing agents, and the willingness of the state to allow for meaningful bottom-up institutions are crucial in forest co-management. The paper opens up new research avenues in the context of local power play and social learning in forest management.