Learning through community based conservation: The process of social learning among the women of Ghandruk Village, Nepal

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Abstract

Social learning is a process that encompasses individual and group learning through dynamic processes of interaction and communication. Such learning is essential for knowledge generation and plays a critical role in shaping governance practices that have democratic quality and contribute to sustainable development. This comes about through the fostering of empowerment and cohesion within communities but also through promoting self-reflexivity, aspects that are both inherent to the process and outcome of social learning. However, such qualitative intangible skills and results are often overlooked by political expectations that tend to be geared towards promoting instrumental skills and achieving hard results that are verifiable and quantifiable. This article presents the results of a month of fieldwork in the Annapurna Conservation Area in Ghandruk village, Kaski district Nepal in 2011. This conservation area has a standing tradition of fusing local communities as key partners in forest management, in particular fostering women’s involvement in conservation activities. With the intent of understanding how participants learn from conservation efforts, research was focused on the women’s learning process, using Social and Transformative Learning Theories. This study found that development programs and corresponding assessments have focused mainly on hard skills such as literacy, plantation and tourism management. Nevertheless, women are aware of their own learning process, not only expressing instrumental acquirements but also reflecting upon the interconnected transformations that conservation brought to their lives. Awareness and reflexivity of the learning process can enhance involvement and ownership over conservation and development. This work outlines specific recommendations to actively promote social learning as a venue capable of fostering greater participatory and deliberative quality in governance and conservation efforts.
Introduction

Participation in natural resource management has become a normative practice for conservation activities in developing countries (Berkes 2004, Chambers 1997). There is increasing recognition that social transformations towards a sustainable society such as a community-based conservation must be collectively elaborated and learned (Muro and Jeffrey 2009, Percy 2005).

The Annapurna Conservation Area (ACA) is situated in the western Himalayan region in Nepal. Local institutions and the Conservation Area Management Committee (CAMCs) have the legal rights to use and manage the forested land (Mehta and Heinen, 2001, Wells and Sharma, 1998). The village of Ghandruk was selected by the King Mahindra Trust for Nature Conservation to have a field office and community based activities since 1986 (Mehta and Heinen 2001, Bajracharya et al 2007, Baral et al 2007). Women development committees were created to involve women in development and to teach women skills on conservation. Ghandruk has repeatedly showcased as successful at “integrating conservation and development” and research has found that residents in the Annapurna Conservation Area have experienced success from community based conservation (Bajracharya et al 2006, Bajracharya et al 2007, Mehta and Heinen 2001, Baral and Stern 2009, Baral et al 2010, Khadka and Nepal 2001, Nepal 2008). This model of community-led conservation has been used elsewhere in conservation areas in Nepal (Mehta and Heinen 2001, Gurung 2004) under the administration of the National Trust for Nature Conservation.

Most of the literature has focused on the effectiveness of the Annapurna Conservation Area these assessments have been quantitative in nature, relying on surveys, statistical methodology and comparative analysis with surrounding villages. These reports cite outcomes such as the development of a sanitation program, literacy programs, fuel programmes, tourism activity, group plantations, cultural programmes, and training by conservation officers (Bajracharya et al 2005, Bajracharya et al 2007, Baral et al 2007, Baral et al 2010, Khadka and Nepal 2010, Mehta and Heinen 2001, Nepal 2007, Spiteri and Nepal 2008).

There is increasing recognition that social transformations towards a sustainable society such as a community-based conservation must be collectively elaborated and learned (Muro and Jeffrey 2009, Percy 2005). The learning process in community conservation operates through a complex plane, in which change comes about not only through the acquisition of technical skills but also through social skills. The understanding the whole learning requires context; in other words the what, when, where, why, and how of learning may be best understood within a specific context (Mezirow, 2000), which means acknowledging its interaction with vital aspects such as knowledge systems, norms, values and power. It follows that to capture the full richness of social learning, studies should focus on qualitative methodology within on a single case study (Percy 2005). Unlike instrumental learning, social learning is not open to test or quantification as it may involve internal changes that are generally hard to measure or define and consequently less tangible for authorities to recognize and account for. Social learning process promises to unleash changes which are not pre-defined, i.e., unpredictable, and that can be seen as threatening the status quo (Coimbra 2011).

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1Based on the successful experience of community-based conservation in Annapurna Conservation Area (ACA), Makalu-Burun National Park was established in 1991. The King Mahindra Trust for Nature Conservation (KMTNC) was changed into the National Trust for Nature Conservation (NTNC) after the fall of the monarchy.
This study aims to understand the learning processes of the women in Ghandruk in the Annapurna Conservation Project, using the learning process encompassed by social learning theory. Social learning in community-based conservation involves participation, interaction, and reflection on change by participants and operates from a feed-back loop between deliberation and action, both at the individual and collective level (Pahl-wostl2006, Cundill et al 2011, Wals et al 2007). To do such analysis we will identify different learning outcomes, be context sensitive and highlight factors that seem relevant to explain both the nature and results of the learning process. The learning process is framed under the theoretical foundation of social learning theory, hopefully contributing to the research development of this theory in the field of participatory research and development within natural resource. The purpose of this study is to identify the nature of learning and results produced throughout the process of community based conservation management among women in Ghandruk, Nepal. The results will be described through social learning theories, using instrumental and communicative learning concepts.\(^2\)

The methodology of a single case study served adequately to illustrate the learning process of women within a single village since learning processes are embedded in cultural representations and social structures. The methodological approach necessarily implies that results and conclusions are neither extensive nor possible to generalize outside the domain of our inquiry but nevertheless serve to identify and explore relevant factors to understand and promote greater participatory and deliberative quality in conservation efforts.

Research was conducted with the assistance of staff and independent translators at the Annapurna Conservation Area at the Ghandruk field office during the month of June 2011. Data collection relied strongly on participant observation and semi-structured interviews. Due to the fact that fieldwork took place during monsoon and peak agricultural season it allowed a brief period of time but nevertheless a relevant glimpse of the seasonal workload experienced by women. This approach allowed me (Kaitlin Almack) to spend time interviewing women in their households while participating in agricultural activities such as planting maize/rice, cooking, gathering grass, and firewood. Focusing on two woman; one being member of the Gurung caste and the other of the Bike caste; such choice allowed me to gather more in-depth information on individual lives while accessing daily activities from two different perspectives. This participatory observation occurred during a series of group activities where social interaction was naturally strong. Participant observation also consisted of attending community meetings with the CAMC (Community Area Management Council) and conducting a focus group with the women that were active members of the group.

The intensity of this approach in some ways levered the inevitable limitations of conducting fieldwork in a short time. In total 30 women were interviewed in the village. A series of questions about the conservation process were asked to each of the women, but time was also given to expand about opinions on conservation policies to ascertain dimensions of social learning. Each participants had various degrees of involvement in the Women Development Committee over the period of conservation; ranging from non-members to regular members and included some that held leadership positions. A series of questions about

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\(^2\)A similar approach was used by (Sinclair et al, 2011) whom found that participation resulted in transformative learning in participants of the Aaruko-Sokoke forest conservation programme in Kenya.)
the conservation process were asked to each of the women, but time was also given to expand about opinions on conservation policies. Such questions were complemented or related to questions that looked into the learning process in detail. For a quicker introduction into the political context, key informant interviews were completed with the village leader (headman) and six members of the ACAP staff in Pokhara and Ghandruk.

The researcher’s interaction with local villagers is considered to be part of the research, giving back relevant information of how this particular relationship is part of the context and the learning process. Interaction with outsiders has become a standard experience for Ghandruk’s women; this comes about by tourism, an activity that has brought to the village hundreds of thousands of international and domestic tourists a year. The presence of experts and field officers is also recurring; thus interacting with westerners through providing a service has become a normative practice in this tourist village, shaping particular representations and ascribing power roles to each side. Such aspects inevitably underlie interviews and conversations and should therefore not be ignored. Today the Annapurna Conservation Area remains one of the most cited cases amongst the conservation community in relation to Nepal, to the degree that, besides tourism, the presence of foreign fieldworkers has become a familiar sight and answering research questionnaires and interviews on conservation, tourism or ecology is now a standard practice for local residents.

**Modes of Learning**

In our study, we distinguish instrumental and communicative types of learning. ‘Instrumental learning ‘is related to acquisition of knowledge that is often task or action oriented and technical in nature and is imparted by an external party, typically an instructor. This type of knowledge is predominantly many social contexts, and typically gathers a greater visibility and legitimacy, within policy-making contexts (Wals et al, 2007). Not surprisingly, instrumental learning together with its instrumental rationality tends to overrule or displace communicative skills and knowledge (Mezirow 1996). Communicative learning refers to the ability of the learner to negotiate his or her own purposes, values and meaning, while involving a broad range of human cognitive aspects that entail motions intentions, and moral issues (Mezirow 2000). This mode of understanding includes some degree of competence in being aware of the assumptions, intentions and qualifications of the person communicating. Such learning relies heavily on the knower itself in becoming critically reflective not only of others but also one’s own assumptions but also on creativity, that is, the capacity to seek out alternatives and to look at a situation and see otherwise (Ibidem 1998).³

Social learning through communicative processes have deserved increasing attention from experts in development related fields, recognizing such learning as being more supportive of long-term, change towards sustainability (Sterling 2010a, 2010 b, Grunwald 2007, Walset al 2007, Cundillet al 2011, Pahl-

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³ Habermas (1984) identified two major domains of learning with different purposes and logics, that of instrumental and communicative learning, which have been adapted and used by several other authors Mezirow in particular went on to develop transformative learning theory which become highly influential in theoretical approaches to development and learning( Mezirow (1994/1996/1997/1998/2000/2003)
wostl2006, ,Muro and Jeffery 2008 ,Mcwhinneyet al2003). On the other hand, it is important to notice that learning processes, independently of their inclinations and dispositions, can serve as complementary and even reinforcing paths for a general transformative process (Young, 2006). Instead of placing an exclusive focus on different approaches, what seems particularly relevant to consider and distinguish in the learning process is how the awareness of the learning process varies, that is, if it’s “the result of deliberate inquiry; incidental, a by-product of another activity involving intentional learning; or mindlessly assimilative” (Mcwhinneyet al 2003). (See Figure 1)

For the purposes of this study, instrumental and communicative modes of learning are to be taken as differentiated poles of a general understanding of learning that actively commits people to far-reaching processes of change. In community-based conservation projects, it’s particularly important to take in the ensemble of perspectives, knowledge and experiences which are necessary in order to reach feasible and creative answers to questions for which no ready-made solutions are available (Walls, 2007). Learning is then to be understood as an open process, context bound and very much a social event, in which participants learn with and through each other. Such approach can be explained and named in a number of ways, overall indicating what we refer here as social learning.

By seeking the relevance of social and qualitative learning, we do not seek to compare competing approaches and their relative value; instead we seek to underline their collaborative potential and understand results beyond strict binary categories of success and failure. Instead of an arranged assembly of causal relations, learning will be understood as a process of complex interactions between agents and their environment, between the objective structures and events and the subjective mode of social actors. Researchers speak of an “iterative feedback between learners and their environment, i.e., the learner is changing the environment, and these changes are affecting the learner” (Pahl-wostl2006). In our case, we will describe how the women in Ghandruk have changed through a variety of conservation activities, and in so doing highlight instrumental, communicative and overall transformative processes. The contextual factors in which knowledge is embedded including, historical, cultural or biographical factors will also be considered.

Despite using women as the main actors of research, the purpose was not to engage in gender analysis but to use women’s individual and collective learning processes as an stimulating case study. This does not ignore some of the crucial aspects of gender embodiment that were observed in Ghandruk. On the contrary, gender roles and inequalities are a relevant part of the power distribution in community conservation and illustrate challenges to social learning.

Social Learning

Recently considerable emphasis has been placed in the more communicative and strategic aspects of Social learning Theory is based on the idea that people, collectively, are capable of forming a learning system that can cope with uncertainty and challenges. Making use of stakeholders different knowledge, interests and experiences, it has been applied through a vast array of participatory methods, with the intention of fostering collective sustainable change (Muro and Jeffery 2008, Walset et al 2007). (Cundill et al 2011).This orientation makes it particularly relevant in natural resource management, as it addresses complex social processes such as the role of participation in its governance process. As explained by Muro and Jeffery (2009), “social learning is understood as a process of communication and collective learning potentially
establishing and changing relationships thus contributing to transforming existing structures of governance”. Social learningThis is relevant as major challenges of participation community based management relates to power inequalities (Khadka and Nepal 2010). Social learning actively seeks heterogeneity in participation and its design needs to be aware of power dynamics of in-group learning. Such learning is aided by the role of the facilitator as a “process expert” rather than by the formal process of disseminating knowledge which typically relies on a much more hierarchical role of those that “know” and those that don’t (Walset al/2007). The most important goals of social learning are about learning from and with each other, promoting the diversity of in-group learning, creating trust and social cohesion and building in participants a sense of ownership over learning processes and results.

Social learning can be described in several ways, covering spontaneous if not inevitable social phenomenon between interacting people to a strategic tool in assisting processes of transformation. The concept of social learning in relation to natural resource management is gaining more popularity amongst theory and action research (Percy 2005, Walset al/2007). This orientation make social learning particularly relevant as it addresses complex social processes such as the role of participation in the governance process. The different modes of social learning lay across a wide spectrum allowing also be translated into different modes of learning that a given collective is prepared to acknowledge and implement in the pursuit of change (see Table 1).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Certainty</th>
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<th>Type of Intervention</th>
<th>Intervening Role</th>
<th>Modes of Learning</th>
<th>Results</th>
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<td>Much certainty</td>
<td>Closed goals</td>
<td>Transmission</td>
<td>Instruction (experts as source of knowledge)</td>
<td>Instrumental</td>
<td>Hard results (measurable changes)</td>
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<td>towards outcome</td>
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<td>Learnt activities</td>
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<tr>
<td>Little certainty</td>
<td>Open goals to be</td>
<td>Transformation</td>
<td>Facilitation (promoting-self-generating knowledge)</td>
<td>Communicative</td>
<td>Soft Results (process changes and quality of learning) trust, collaboration, empowerment</td>
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<td>towards direction of</td>
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Case Study

Ghandruk village is nestled under some of the world’s tallest mountains, a central reason why the region remains as Nepal’s most popular tourist area. The area experiences a flux of tourists each year as more than half of the trekking visitors to Nepal will come through Ghandruk (Bajracharya et al, 2007). The village of Ghandruk is a day’s walk from the nearest road towards Pokhara, making it isolated from road access but within a day’s walk from Nepal’s second biggest city.

Most families are dependent on subsistence agriculture and selling or bartering goods for their household income. Other major economic activities include small businesses and providing accommodation for tourists. The lodge owners are the wealthier people in the village and often have a second house in Pokhara. The men in the community are often recruited in the Indian Army or work overseas. The majority of the women’s main occupation is farming, collecting fuel wood and forest products, and taking care of family (Gurung 2004).

The village is comprised of six wards, and a total of 484 households. Caste/ethnicity is a well-know relevant social variable in Nepal and as research shows, it can equally be a significant factor in determining local attitudes towards conservation (Mehta and Heinen, 2001, Spiteri and Nepal, 2008, Khada and Nepal, 2010, Baral et al, 2007). The ethnic makeup of Ghandruk is predominately made up of Gurungs representing 62 percent of the population (Baral and Stern, 2007). The minor ethnic groups are the Brahmins and Chhetris (15 percent), and the artisan castes (23 percent). The artisan include the Kamis, Magars, Sakris (Gurung, 2004), these are considered as the lowest caste and traditionally are not treated on par with other castes.

With some diversity of range in social-economic classes, the village portrays a dynamic social life. Young women use Facebook, listen to international pop hits, speak English, go to university in Pokhara and often go abroad to work. However this scenario is not homogenous, since there are also women in the community that live traditional lives using the forest for fuel, and collecting Non-Timber forest products (NTFP). Such variations seems to be shaped by factors such as age and levels of literacy, thus traditional practices tend to be maintained by the elder and/or less literate women.

In Nepal, as in other places, forest use is embedded into cultural practices and social structures, including gendered division of labour (Nightingale, 2011, Agarwal, 2009). In Ghandruk many of the important ties that traditionally linked its inhabitants to the forest are still alive today. The forest is also the repository of medicinal resources that some of the older women are in charge of, by identifying and using plant and animal lore. The activities directly related to the forest include women’s daily tasks, such as gathering forest vegetation for buffalos, as well as seasonal products that include NTFPs for health and ritual purposes. In general, during monsoon season, women spend much of their time dedicated to farming and animal husbandry but also household chores rather than forest activity. In the dry season, the women travel to the forest every day to gather firewood (when there is less agricultural activity). The villagers use leaf litter and buffalo manure as their primary source of fertilizer for crops. Social gender division of labour is very much enacted in relation to the forest, and typically male roles activities include collecting timber and logging (when poise has been granted). Despite the traditional division of labour, the flexible role of women has been highlighted in Ghandruk due to relevant rates of male immigration, which makes mainly women and children the permanent residents of the village (Nepal 2007). Through semi-structured interviews the women in Ghandruk village report an average of labour time between 30 minutes to plantations sites and two hours to the community forest area to gather firewood.
The social structures determine both how labour is divided but also how groups learn in community based-conservation activities. Such norms see themselves reflected and reproduced in the separation of male and female tasks in conservation management. On the other hand, class stratification (castes) critically relates to the use of local forests, such as land access (collecting forest products) and ownership (of plantations).

The origin of the ACAP in Ghandruk

Current forest management in Ghandruk falls within a complex historical process. The Forest Nationalization Act from 1957 allowed the Nepali government to assume ownership of all private and communal forests. The Act eliminated private ownership of forests except for individual trees and small groves within private land, and it vested the authority to the Department of Forest as the de facto tenant and manager of forests on behalf of the people of Nepal. The indigenous property regime was replaced with democratization that resulted in rapid depletion. Centralization of authority made it open access because the government could not enforce rules at the local level and local communities were alienated from management (Baral and Stern, 2010). Reports speak of the region experiencing environmental problems, due to the pressure of a local growing population and unregulated trekking activities that lead to degradation, erosion, deforestation and landslides (Khadka and Nepal, 2010).

In 1982, King Mahendra issued a directive to protect the Annapurna Conservation Area (ACAP), declaring it protected under the national parks act. In this way ACAP became established in Ghandruk as a pilot project by the King National Fund for Nature Conservation (KMTNC) regulated by the government as an autonomous, non-governmental organization. According to assessment studies, the first two years the project began slowly as the community reacted to accepting that they would lose control of their resources. The NTNC gained the trust of the local people by introducing user fees and introducing development activities in to the community (Holden, 2010).

The historical process of forest protection in Ghandruk was again relevantly shaped at the onset of the new century by the Maoist revolution, which severely impacted the village. Also that period met a great migration towards urban areas compared to more than any other community in the conservation area (Baralet al2010). Community members reported that there were incidents of poaching and illegal cutting of trees by the rebels and some locals, while the Maoists lived in the forest. During that period the field office was burnt, conservation programmes halted all activities, committees were not allowed to meet and projects collapsed. Thus the process of Forest Conservation, in its changes, dynamics and character, is intimately related to a political process, a fact well recognized by the women of the community: “first we experienced the Rana dynasty, then democracy then Panchayat. I have seen the changes within the forest”.

Today, the Annapurna Conservation Project has a “complex multilayer structure of many inter-relationships and horizontal and vertical linkages” (Baralet al 2010). Formally, the government holds the title to non-private lands within ACAP, while local communities have the management rights to those lands. Under ACAP stands the local Conservation Area Management Council (CAMC) which is responsible for governing both the forest and other conservation activities. Its structure is centralized, reflecting the local structure and hierarchy, with the village leader also heading the conservation management area council (Baralet al2007). These responsibilities include the management of natural resources that include collecting revenues from harvest permits or “posej” ACAP staff often provides technical assistance to help CAMC implement programmes and help with monitoring (Baralet al 2005). Nevertheless, as stated in interviews and corroborated in other inquiries, it is the aim of the staff at the headquarters in Pokarathat the conservation
area becomes self-governing, dispensing the technical expertise of ACAP (also in Nepal 2007, Baral and Stern, 2010, Bajracharya et al 2006).

Women development committees “Women’s group”

In the early stages of conservation international donors have put pressure to include a gender component and in 1990 the project staff at ACAP introduced a women development committee as one of their main programmes. (Baral et al 2010). Women in Ghandruk are engaged in conservation in various ways. There are women development Committees (WDC) in each ward (Baral and Stern, 2009), with positions including the secretary, president, vice-president, treasurer and members. Furthermore, there is an over reaching executive committee that manages the WDCs and reports to the Conservation Area Management council. The women’s activities have included fundraising, health/sanitation, education/literacy, presenting cultural programmes to tourists and financial development through micro-finance. One of the main programmes led by women development groups have has been the establishment of tree plantations and the selling of vegetation for fundraising efforts.). The representation of village women in Women’s groups has been regulated and enforced by ACAP, stating that there must be one woman from each household attending the monthly women’s meeting or else face a 50 rupee fine. Such rule, however, is not enforced, since many women indicated that they were not involved and these regulations were not imposed on the lower caste.

..Overall, the ACAP project is unique because of the relatively long period of community conservation activities - from 1989 until 2011, with a period of inactivity during the conflict period (2001-2007). Over the twenty plus years the governance of the Annapurna Conservation Area has been categorized as a resilient adaptive system because of its ability to bounce back from governance challenges (Baral et al 2010). Both in staff interviews and literature, the involvement of local people, is recognized and the women’s group is taken as the key element in the success of the project (Gurung 2004, Holden 2010).
Learning process and social learning outcomes in Ghandruk

**Instrumental Process**
- **New information**
  - learning from ACAP staff, new rules of CAMC, understanding goals
- **New technical skills**
  - tree planting, adoption of new technology, literacy, handling finances
  - self-organizing meetings and initiatives
- **Deducing interrelationships**
  - understanding the causal relationship between forest and well being

**Communicative Processes**
- **New attitudes**
  - expressing conservation ideas to illegal loggers
  - increased confidence for expression
- **Ownership over processes**
  - expressing pride, ownership over forest
  - taking initiative and encouraging others
- **Building unity within WDC**
  - sharing experiences and shared responsibility
- **Questioning status quo**
  - questioning certain policies and decisions of CAMC/ACAP
- **Self reflection and pride**
  - discourse between women reflecting on success of the project

**Social Learning**
- Transformative processes and space for critical reflection

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Figure 1 Social Learning within Instrumental and Communicative Processes
Instrumental Learning Process

“From the ACAP programme, we learnt skills and awareness”

Instrumental learning can be described as “formal learning” where an instructor trains participants in technical skills. This has been the main case in Ghandruk where the conservation ‘authority’ has decided the topics of training and knowledge has been passed on through ‘experts’. Results from these learning processes can be considered as the outcome of a “top down” process led by the conservation authority. These results coincide with those recognized and praised by many assessment studies done over the Annapurna Conservation Area. In addition, they were spontaneously identified in interviews both by the ACAP staff women as well as the women themselves. Such unanimity points to the fact that such outcomes are the ones that are socially visible and implicitly accepted as legitimate (Table 2).

Deducing Interrelationships- Causal Connections

Through the extensive training programmes from the ACAP the participants acquired new theoretical information about the forest. Interviews showed that a significant number of them knew the technical reasons why biodiversity was important and why the conservation authority was interested in protecting this area. In their own words, “In the forest there are many wildlife, pigeons, birds and endangered animals like the barking deer and snow leopard. If there is no conservation then they will become extinct and it will dissolve the tourist business”. The instrumental causal connection, in this case between conservation and economic activity, becomes explicit. The awareness of social common benefits and “services” linked to the rationale of conservation were also relevant in interviews, “I think the forest is common property of the village because everything for daily life comes from the jungle. wild vegetables, timber, medicinal plants, and fire. Money is not everything. If we manage the forest well then there is no landslide”.

A part of the technical training focused on bringing awareness into the causal relationship between the health of the forest and social and economic well-being. Women became aware of how their own actions have shaped the forest and their community while participating in conservation initiatives. This logical reasoning of cause and effect seems to have been the model of knowledge that was used to highlight the relationships women have with the forest, and the outcomes of conservation. “We have to conserve the forest, without the forest there will be landslides, decrease water availability, if we plant then we get benefit to us.” From the inquiries it’s not possible to determine or extrapolate on how many participants assimilated this understanding; instead, what seems relevant is that a particular kind of instrumental and causal rationality was implemented in order to create awareness of the importance of biodiversity and forest conservation.

New Tasks, Processes and Technical Skills

Learning the forest rules and regulations as developed by the CAMC was one central normative influence to structure the new relationship to the forest and to the legitimacy of the new form of governance. One critical introduction relates to the illegality of poaching and the other of the taxing of posej. All of the women interviewed were aware of such norms and the consequences of not compiling regulations of the conservation management council, “I know that even if I want to cut down one tree from my own land, I have to get posej”.

Following the technical information, learning strategies of conservation in Ghandruk village have focused on the development of tasks and programs that required technical skills. These skills included agricultural, plantation and literacy training (Baral et al 2006). In parallel new structures and devices were implanted, such as the stove programmes, in order to reduce the pressure from deforestation, and several of the women had to learn how to use kerosene. Electricity through micro-hydro was introduced in the village in 1990, a technical structure that marked a momentous change in the villagers’ way of life. From rice cookers to mobile telephones, new rhythms, interests and needs became active. Women also learnt the importance of tourism and the task associated with providing tourist
services. These conservation programmes encouraged instrumental learning focused on effectiveness, efficiency in the delivery of the conservation program.

A woman reflects on what she has learnt from the ACAP programme from 1990 to the present,

“Before conservation there was lack of education, every day we would go and collect green trees. The men would cut the trees and the women would carry them. There was no women’s group or education, we did not send our daughters to school instead we sent them into the jungle to collect trees. It was difficult because the village was empty of trees, now it is full of trees.”

One key ingredient in the success of this conservation approach was how it was implemented in an assortment of areas that covered many different needs - economic, social and environmentally relevant - thus reinforcing each other in a common synergetic outcome. Such approach had consequently a rich reflection in the social learning process, making clear that harder and softer results may overlap. One particular relevant example is the literacy program, which unfolded into a set of different abilities and un-linear outcomes.

Nevertheless, the conservation authority reported the success of literacy mainly from the instrumental process and hard outcomes. As one ACAP staff officer mentioned:

“Literacy gave the opportunity to share to create community, to share ideas. It takes time to learn... It was after literacy class that the women could learn technical trainings, such as alternative energy programmes, improved cooker and stopped using traditional stove’.

Besides such achievements, literacy as an instrumental skill reverberated into multiple capacities and operated as a human capital that had a profound impact on how women view themselves and was key in unleashing a variety of “soft” outcomes, such as self-reflective learning processes and a change in confidence, gender empowerment and communicative assertiveness. The secretary of Ward 7 reflects on what literacy brought to her, “Before 15 years ago, we did not have education or literacy, only the men did everything. Now the women group has brought unity, we have confidence and education”

New Information: Financial Benefits

The financial benefits from conservation are another set of results of which the women are self-aware. Planting trees in-group plantations allowed women to collect money and mobilize their resources, whilst also reducing labour time saved by having easier access to forests. The instrumental link between conservation and financial benefits was also expressed in relation to local identity and culture: “Through ACAP I have learnt that is it important to conserve the forest because the tourist will come, it is also important to conserve traditions then we can begin selling traditional dresses to tourists.” The collection of funds for the women’s group through the engagement of cultural programs for tourists is an obvious outcome of such connection.

On the other hand, financial management skills brought other less tangible results, such as a greater autonomy and improvement in their quality of life. The women are proud because they are able to raise money for the community. An important aspect came through the fact that some women have been able to manage their own finances in new ways so that “The women’s group is able to fund projects, we are investing and this is empowering. From the money we bought kitchen utensils for festivals”

The success of the Annapurna Conservation Area background is valued in terms of the technical skills acquired by participants and also the instrumental results that came forth. According to interviews, most women were aware of the

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5Since 1996 the conservation area management council has required lodge owners to stop using firewood for cooking for tourists and use kerosene. This measure matched the social economic context of the village, since lodge owners tend to be wealthy and will have their own private plantations for personal consumption of fuel wood.
tasks they were expected to complete and aware of their success, “we plant plantations, run cultural programme, created day care centre, we began to use better stoves and if someone needs a loan we can it provide to them”.

Awards and Recognitions

The results of this instrumental oriented learning has been the international recognition of the ACAP programme (Baral et al 2007) by the WWF Award for conservation (1992), and the United Nation Environmental Programmes (1994) (Baral et al 2010). A woman expresses such recognition, “The CMAC got three awards. It was on display.” The acknowledgment of such recognition naturally infuses participants with empowering and motivational attitudes, which are part of soft results. As stated before, just as instrumental and communicative processes are not exclusive in social learning, hard and soft results may often overlap.

Communicative Learning Process

In the case pertaining to the women of Ghandruk Nepal, the process of working through instrumental and task oriented outcomes has lead to an unintentional process of communicative learning and soft results. Communicative learning refers to a process where communicative competences become highlighted through a re-examination and negotiation of one's own purposes, values, feelings, and meanings through and with others. The communicative processes were less explicitly acknowledged in the interviews, but none the less were frequently reported. In the process of forest conservation, looking took place through a complex formal and informal net of social relationships comprised by women's groups, community but also the conservation authority. In Ghandruk’s case, the process of working through instrumental and task oriented outcomes through the development of women’s group has lead unintentional to a process of soft learning. The outcomes of communicative learning are emergent and intimately webbed within the process.

Recognizing and Communicating Internal Changes.

The changes brought about by new ways of perceiving the forest gave way to a process of re-examination conductive of reflexivity and critical thinking. This process become highlighted by contrasting similar or different experiences, a typical outcome of social learning that in Ghandruk’s case was carried out through group meetings of the WDC. An elder in the community reflects on how her perspective on the forest has changed over the twenty years of conservation, “When I was young, we had the forest but we did not have rules. In between we destroyed much of the forest. Now, we know the forest is important but we do not use it as before”. On the other hand, women reflect upon the changes of social roles and identities in relation to the conservation programme, “Before conservation the men would cut the trees and the women would carry. There was no woman’s group or education, we did not send our daughters to school instead we sent them into the jungle”. Predictably, such awareness fuels and supports important processes of empowerment: “Conservation has changed me and other women. In the beginning I could not say my name in a mass group, now I can give a lecture and talk to other women. I see that other women are becoming more active and can changing society.” Within this mode of learning, new values and rules are negotiated primarily within our own system and values, integrating and transcending previous tenets and finding meaning there in “If we conserve the forest it will become becomes rich in biodiversity. I conserve for myself, for the livelihood of the community and because it is gift from God”.

Ownership over conservation

In soft learning results, ownership is evidently more subtle than a sense of legal entitlement and lease of property. Through group processes a sense of ownership was developed about forest resources and forest protection. The women feel that the forest stewardship is their own responsibility, despite the forest being tenure of Nepali government. This sense of ownership has been facilitated through social learning, and brought about by group activities they have been involved with.
“First we had a meeting and fenced the grazing land. We began to plant trees (even though there is no legal paper saying this is our forest). It became our forest. We have sold now sold three trees; it is personal and social being a part of this group”

Women also maintained a significant sense of ownership over the forest during the conflict period. One of the women commented that although poaching occurred during the period without an operating governance structure, “The women were watching our forest so people were aware, we had no authorized committees. Women were afraid but we were watching so the Maoist did not cut down our trees”.

**Sharing ideas between women and with outsiders**

Such sense of ownership speaks clearly of owning not just the Forest but the Conservation process in which participants feel their invested interest as well as responsibility. Unlike other types of ownership, forest conservation gave ground to share intangible resources, such as ideas and experiences. “The woman’s group makes everything easier…you can share ideas with one another; you can have interaction and conversation” Similar to more tangible common ownership, this sharing of resources seems to entail empowerment “After the ACAP came we learnt about conservation and the forest, we began to have ideas to share. Before conservation, we did not share, we were innocent.”

In the process of learning, there are many processes and outcomes that remain largely unconscious, particularly when such learning happens unintentionally and is not the explicit goal of development strategies. Such aspect came up directly during a focus group conducted with the community, “you come and ask us why we have done conservation together; we know why, but when you ask us, we can’t tell”. To be sure, the presence of foreigners, such as tourists or researchers, which is a direct and tangible result from conservation efforts, brings about an unintentional but very strong impact on the communicative learning process, since the relationship native-outsider propels a reflection of identity building, in which self-reflection is inevitable.

**Questioning Status Quo**

Once women engage in reflection they can also make knowledge transfers, reframe problems, build creative processes, and effect changes (Mezirow, 2003). The first sign in such a process is the ability and confidence to question the status quo or the “ability to ask why” (Van der Meer et al. 2009). In our case this aspect translates in critical assessment expressed over the information they have been given by the Conservation Area Management Council.

“One person came from Pokhara and requested posej from the CAMC. I asked, “Why do you give such a large quantity to him?” It is deforestation, I think you should refuse that quantity posej!... It was the women complaining to the CAMC, but the CAMC did nothing!”

Despite having little decision making power on the Conservation Area Management Council, women express critical reasoning an aspect that is made more evident in a socio-cultural background that expects women to be submissive, particularly within the political sphere. Outcomes such as these have therefore to be understood and assess within their own context.

Some women critically reflect on how their work have influences on sustainability, This woman showed how the importance of her connection to the forest for conservation “We owe it to the future to conserve the forest, it is for the whole community and for future generations” For the most part communicative learning occurs between women as discourse.
Critical Reflection The case of cooking stoves

Conservation has contributed to a reduction of firewood harvested from the forest. Such measure answers directly to one of the objectives of the ACAP: “develop and introduce new energy technology to suit the local needs and to reduce the demand for firewood, the labour burden, particularly for women” (Bajracharya et al. 2007). During fieldwork in 2011, most women were still relying on fuel from the forest and the distribution of improved cooking stoves was not uniform. Nevertheless, ACAP officials together with the leader of the Conservation Area Management Council showed particular enthusiasm in introducing a greater dependence on electricity or fossil fuel rather than reliance on forest resources for household fire.

Jagmaya Gurung has been a member of the women’s group since 1989; she is the wife of the village Lama and has six children that have also been educated at the public school funded by ACAP. Jagmaya questions the changes in fuel policies established by the Conservation Area Management Council and her changing relationship with the forest. She first acknowledged the importance of the forest as provider of services that benefit her and her family (mainly their instrumental outcomes), but she also questioned the ability of the managers to understand the varied and more subtle aspects of traditional relationship with forest resources.

Her case portrays how learning has brought up reflective questions of sense of place, values and ethics related to learning. Like for other women, the forest has many practical uses for Jagmaya, some directly related to the most dire necessities of livelihood, others feeding other less tangible needs which relate to physical and spiritual health of individuals and community (medicinal and ritual aspects), Jagmaya has a big kitchen outside of the monastery, where she cooks for her household and other members of the community. The range of utility of such practices ranges from the most obvious to the less understood, as is the case of the smoke of the traditional stoves which women know to help preserve the traditional buildings\(^5\). Beyond strictly utilitarian services, the fire derived from the wood of the forest bears strong cultural meaning in traditional cultures, and is often an integral part of funerals, births and marriage rituals (McHugh, 1978), that are fundamental social hallmarks in the lives of individuals. In the case of Ghandruk, the ash and coals are commonly used in ritual, in washing and in healing and significantly there is a rich lexicon in the local language to name fire, ashes, and coal. Fire also creates a space of gathering and of feeding the community during events and during planting season, adding its services as a social significant. From food necessities to spiritual needs, fire epitomizes the full richness a society may derive from the natural world, epitomized by the forest (Coimbra, 2006).

Jagmaya expresses how her life is connected to the forest.

“Everything I need I get from the forest, my life is always connected to the forest. Why should I stop using wood? I have a gas stove, and I do not use it. I cook buffalo food on the open stove, the buffalo fertilizes my field. I feed my family by cooking around the fire.”

This case portrays how learning has brought up reflective question of sense of place, values and ethics related to learning. In her approach, Jagmaya expresses the will to integrating traditional cultural actions with the recognition of relevant and necessary changes for future sake. The push for a switch in energy sources has not just a consequence in natural resources but also in cultural grounds. In societies experiencing rapid transformations critical reflection is intensified since traditional structures have weakened and individuals must be prepared to make many diverse decisions on their own (Mezriow 1994).

\(^5\)ACAP officials mentioned that a challenge in switching for alternative fuels derives from this very aspect, since women defend its utility despite “no scientific evidence for this”. In fact, there is evidence for the preserving effects of wood smoke, but what is more relevant is how such empirical traditional knowledge is met with dismissal.
Discussion

Ghandruk village bears similar traits with other community-based projects throughout the developing world. Namely in order for that conservation and development to succeed there should be fostered simultaneously for mutual interests. One of main goals of community based conservation is to build capacity through participation. Communicative and social learning directly invest in such purpose, since participation is not only the goal but the very medium through which learning occurs. One of the outcomes of social learning, however, rests precisely in questioning the dynamics and quality of participation and social relations. From this viewpoint, this work identifies some key challenges to participation and learning, namely in equality issues that manifest mainly at the economic level (income), age, gender, and caste in Ghandruk village Not surprisingly, learning processes, particularly those that are explicitly implemented as transformative, typically highlight the social cleavages and power challenges dwelling within the community.

In Ghandruk there are signs that equality standards have been addressed through conservation and been put into motion, for instances through the promotion of collective and convergent activities across the community, such as cleaning trails, participating in CAMC, or in children with different social strata attending school together. The instructor of the women’s group comments of how the caste system has changed since conservation activities: “You can’t label high and low caste anymore. Traditionally the low caste have their own area and are not clean, now women like Ram Pariyar have become involved as secretary of the day-care centre”

Conservation programmes brought about positive gender empowerment, namely in the way women view themselves and their potential within society: “Of course a woman can be a forest guard as a woman can do anything a man can. It is the 21st century... women are capable of patrolling the forest, they could catch illegal hunters. Women could be what they want only if there is opportunity forus”. In such empowering process, small steps may reveal considerable symbolic significance: “Before, I was hiding behind my husband but now I sit in front of my husband at the CAMC meetings, we are proud because we form a group” The conservation programmes supported by ACAP have had, amongst their “side effects” the capacity to encourage group processes in which activities developed over the years the presence of trust amid the conservation community members.

In Ghandruk, as in other cases of community-based management, the challenges of bringing about participation rests on the fact that social learning is embedded in the very structures that defies participation and reproduces social division. In the case of Nepal, the power dynamics contained in the intersection of class, caste, and gender are transferred into participatory conservation programmes(Nightingale,2010). This problem has been recognized as “the difficulty for people to challenge local politicians” and that “the contribution of ACAP programmes to the poor has yet to be sufficient since community’s heterogeneity and differentiation is not encouraged” (Bajracharyaet al 2007). The challenge of participation was significantly impacted by the political revolution and the migration that followed; the WDC leader of Ward 7 explains, “There are less people in the community and less people becoming involved. We often experience “karum,” which means we have to cancel the meeting because no participants”.

Barriers Revealed in Social Learning

The same awareness of the limits of community conservation to address social structure has been spoken by local women,“it is easier to exist within the current social structure rather than to create a new one, the men of high caste of high economic benefits benefit the most, where as women and the poor are missing out.” Also, interviews across the members of the low caste have shown that there was a general dissatisfaction from conservation given their greater difficulty of access to the forest to gather folder and firewood. As other researchers have noted, needs and perceptions of community-based conservation in Annapurna Conservation Area are different according to social groups and social dispositions(Mehta and Heinen 2008).
In view of this situation, it’s worth noticing that instrumental knowledge in conservation efforts can unwillingly accommodate a level of participation that remains to a large degree a-critical and can impose itself on communicative processes (Mezirow, 2000). Arguably, participation without power, can be more disempowering than choosing not to participate in the first place.

As it often happens, these socio-economic variables work together, so that older women of lower caste and income are blatantly in an underprivileged situation also in the development process. To this effect, a woman reflects on the learning processes within the privileged situation “if you want to be active in the women’s group, then you must have money. Poor households are dependent on farming and are worried what to eat. They also have low education and therefore cannot be active”. Changes introduced by Conservation initiatives are excellent opportunities to bring about a collective reflection on entrenched social structures such as caste and gender. As community participation happens within existing social structures, it is not uncommon to see an unintended reinforcement of previous gaps as “social elites’ are highly like to abuse the participatory process to further entrench their power, position and influence” (Berkes 2004).

The success of participatory conservation mainly depends on how well it represents the unique needs and values of given social group. In this respect it also becomes clear the challenges that have yet to be met in social discrepancies. This is the case in more directly related cases of gender equality in Nepal. The women interviewed did not know how to influence decision-making on the level of the CAMC. Participation in the women’s group does not lead to direct power over the decision making process, since decisions on the governance of the conservation are between the CAMC and the ACAP staff; as one active member reflects “There is no support for women selected”. A minimum of one woman is assigned to the conservation management council but rarely feels that she has the opportunity to participate, “theoretically there is a woman on the CAMC but she has no power, the men did not want her opinion even though she knew about the forest”. Reduced opportunities for dialogue may limit participation and learning since dialogue is central to communicative processes (Mezirow 2000).

The still insipid public political power of women in Nepal is further hindered by the weight of women’s domestic roles and tasks which inhibit full participation. This fact comes through fieldwork observations as well as research finding from a Khada and Nepal (2010) in the Annapurna Conservation Area in which the top five barriers for community participation where the: “demands from household chores”, “schedule conflicts with agricultural activities”, “lack of free time”, “schedule conflicts with other livelihood activities”, and “demand of family childcare responsibilities”. Public power is also hindered by the combination of gender and illiteracy and the important empowerment changes brought by literacy did also highlights those excluded: “I am not a member of a women’s group since I can’t read or write, and I am member of Pune caste. I don’t think that they would want me”. This gap can be further enhanced by age, as expressed in the self-reflected discourse of women seventy years old, “I am not a member of a women’s group since I am not smart and cannot read. I know how to plant trees, but I cannot write so I don’t know about learning”. Observation shows that literacy programmes have benefited mainly younger women and with higher social economic status, providing further capital for the former and excluding others.

It is important for conservation authorities to understand beforehand how the implementation of certain programmes, such as literacy, impacts existing knowledge systems while carrying their own often unquestioned normative agenda. As research has shown, it is not uncommon for discourses of development to be wrapped up in the idea that educated successfully people move away from practices that are deemed backwards (Nightingale, 2011:167). In other words, the transformation of knowledge systems are not socially neutral and often carry implicit but powerful symbolic pressure, typically equating old and traditional with what is outdated, destitute and ignorant.

Thus, despite good intentions, conservation efforts can reinforce previous inequalities and promote or heighten new exclusions, typically of the elderly ones, who lose the recognition of the knowledge capital they were entitled in traditional social structures. Therefore, there is a need for integrating different knowledge systems through generations, in order to avoid the well-known phenomena of disintegrating demographically the future of rural
societies, as foreseen in the following comment: “Old people have the same attitude as before, they do things differently. The young people have formal education and they see the outside world so they do not join meetings. The young women have more opportunity to go the city, to go abroad but do not care about conservation”.

Thus the inequalities resulting from instrumental learning processes and knowledge transfer need to be a part of group discussions. Such discussions can be part of a communicative and social learning, that is geared into integrating different forms of knowledge, be they “traditional” or “modern”, fast paced or slow moving, formal and informal, promoting collaboration instead of competing stances.

The previously referred case of change of fuel programmes seems to indicate that there is little sensitivity from promoters to the value of traditional knowledge systems and their practices. Jaugmaya’s story given above portrays the example of one woman that is on the cusp of the generational divide in forest knowledge. Without questioning the relevant concern in diminishing deforestation by the alternative use of kerosene, what is argued here is that a much too narrow and simplistic correlation is being established between the use of fire and the threats to the forest. Besides placing a community dependent on a foreign, less than optimal mode of energy, it ignores middle term and middle range solutions that do not envision the absolute replacement of fire together with a healthy human interdependence with the forest. The use of fire for ritual or other traditional practices such as recollecting medicinal herbs are important, albeit non-instrumental links, between people and forest. On the other hand, it is not unknown how the implantation of “modernity” unintentionally brings an estrangement from people to their natural habitat, most obviously in younger generations (Coimbra). It is well known that the relationship between scientific knowledge and local knowledge is not always comfortable in community-based conservation (Berkes, 2004). More often than not, instrumental learning associates with an interpretation of instrumental rationality that tends to depersonalize, objectify, and enhance technical control and manipulation (Mezirow 2000). Integrating local ecological knowledge and practices is increasingly recognized as a desirable attribute of resource management systems (Olson, Berkes, and Folk, 2001). Therefore, one of the main challenges in Ghandruk, as in other rural contexts, is how to integrate, adapt and transform the traditional ties with the forest and make them culturally meaningful and ecologically sustainable.

**Recommendations to promote social Learning**

Conservation programs in Ghandruk has created important changes and learning processes. Over twenty years, strategic instrumental goals, from plantation programmes to literacy training, have produced many relevant outcomes for the three constituent parts of sustainable development – economic, social and environmental. These, amongst other examples, illustrate that leaning is a complex process where many interacting variables influence different levels of outcomes. Even the acquisition of one specific technical skill is not an isolated human activity, being embedded to an individual’s life context which includes all sorts of social relationships, within classroom, school, and community. In that sense, there is always some degree of social learning associated with community based conservation. This work highlights that, social learning can be more than “a mere by-product of another activity involving learning” (McWhinney 2005). Taken as an intentional tool of development, it promotes transformations both at individual and social level, creating a heightened awareness and involvement in the developing process itself. Community based conservation and co-management agreements can therefore go beyond “teaching technical content, by focusing on participation, dialogue and critical thinking that will lead for transformations” (Mezirow 2000). This type of learning calls for an adaptive management, capable of creating and maintain political openness and iterative processes of decision making. The very definition of what is successful conservation needs to open to discussion, lest it becomes an hegemonic uncreative, static assertion. For example, ACAP main message that conservation has been successful, is dispute by ecologists who argue that despite an increase in forest cover, the overall biodiversity of the forests in the Annapurna Conservation Area is decreasing as there is an absence of deadwood to foster biodiversity of less known plants and amphibians (Christensen and Heilmann-Clausen 2009). Reiterative reports of ACA’s success may prevent
more innovative approaches to problem solving and discourages opportunity for social learning through group deliberation and questioning.

As the next step in community-based conservation projects in Ghandruk we identify two important challenges, namely addressing prevalent social inequalities and creatively seek the integration of different knowledge systems. Whilst instrumental objectives of forest conservation maybe the same and offer some degree of convergence within the community, different knowledge systems, environmental perceptions, understanding of interdependence and worldviews may be considerably different (Walset al2007). Such differences need to be addressed and negotiated lest their disruptive power compromises the resilience of the whole endeavor. Through this approach, conflicting interests and their underlying sources, need to be explicated rather than concealed (Walset al2007).

The intentional implementation of a social learning process has its own challenges, namely the fact that the goals and means of such approach remain largely unrecognized by policy-makers and a large part of the research community. Unlike instrumental learning, social communicative learning is not open to test or quantification as it may involve internal changes that are generally hard to measure or define and consequently less tangible for authorities to recognize and account for (Coimbra2011).

On the other hand, it challenges the principles of assessment most of us have learned, which are highly dependent on the mutually exclusive binary of “success or failure.” Social learning process promises to unleash changes which are not pre-defined, i.e., unpredictable, and that can be seen as threatening the status quo (Coimbra2011). Yet for ACAP to foster knowledge for sustainable development, uncertainty should be encouraged, as it opens up spaces for creative learning and deliberation. Although difficult to operationalize, uncertainty of knowledge and managing uncertainty is at the heart of sustainable development (Grunwald 2007).

In our specific context, it challenges the ACAP staff to accommodate heterogeneity and address more uncomfortable situations, namely those that tackle well established power inequalities, clad in gender, cast or in the hegemonic role of “scientific” technical knowledge vs. traditionally knowledge systems. In fact, it requires a change and a questioning of the very role ACAP staff has been assuming, a change from instructor to facilitator Social learning process promises to unleash changes which are not pre-defined, i.e., unpredictable, and that can be seen as threatening the status quo (Coimbra2011). Yet for ACAP to foster knowledge for sustainable development, uncertainty should be encouraged, as it opens up spaces for creative learning and deliberation. Although difficult to operationalize uncertainty of knowledge and managing uncertainty is at the heart of sustainable development (Grunwald 2007). Such change implies moving from the status of expert to that of facilitator, whose central task is to create a learning environment that motivates participants to critically inquiry and find creative answers to questions and common problems through a communicative experience. This change, in fact, seems to meet directly the reported aim of the ACAP staff of seeing the conservation area becoming self-governing. The maturity of the whole development process seems to point out the time is ripe to step forward into such new phase of including social learning into the conservation efforts.

In view of this situation, it’s worth noticing that instrumental knowledge in conservation efforts can unwillingly accommodate a level of participation that remains to a large degree a-critical. Arguably, participation without power, can be more disempowering than choosing not to participate in the first place. One of the outcomes of social learning, however, rests precisely in questioning the dynamics and quality of participation and social relations. From this viewpoint, this work identifies some key challenges to participation and learning, namely in equality issues that manifest mainly at the economic level (income), age, gender, and caste in Ghandruk village.
Conclusion

With the use of learning theories and selecting the women of Ghandruk village as our main group of inquiry, we have sought to identify the nature of learning and concomitant results that are occurring through the community conservation project within Annapurna Conservation Area. In this mapping we sought to investigate the particular relevance of non-instrumental learning processes for conservation management.

For the majority of cases, both women and staff identified “learning” as the acquisition of instrumental information, with most women respondents being able to describe the hard results derived from conservation practices. These include women’s knowledge of conservation policies and regulations, new conservation technical skills, such as those involved in plantation, literacy and concomitant abilities such as financial management. Other outcomes are more related to the implantation of infrastructures, such as day-care centres or alternative energy systems (relying on electricity and kerosene). On the other hand, non-instrumental learning was more implicit in the respondent’s reflective discourses, but nevertheless identified a new sense of group-identity, support and achievement, the capacity to communicate to others new values and ideas, and an increased confidence in their individual potential. These benefits have not been widely recognized by researchers, since the overall success of the ACAP has been identified and measured through quantitative methods of assessment.

From the perspective of social learning theories this study also revealed that some challenges remain to be met by conservation management, namely addressing deeply embedded social inequalities in the community. Gender, income, cast and age gaps are present within the yarn of ACAP governance, compromising its ethics and sustainability. On the other hand, there is the need to recognized and integrated different knowledge systems, under the risk of losing local ecological knowledge and the capacity to envision a fuller engagement between people and forest, beyond instrumental rationality.

While the authors maintain that instrumental and non-instrumental approaches are not exclusive, research suggests that for the Annapurna Conservation Project the time is ripe to apply intentional social learning approaches to community-based natural resource management. Programmes such as literacy learning and women’s groups have created processes for significant non-instrumental learning, but these processes need to be acknowledged, encouraged and developed. Also, besides technical instructors ACAP needs to incorporate facilitators that have the ability to hold learning processes that promote communication, reflection and critical deliberation amongst participants. Such approach bears important challenges to its promoters since it demands a restructuring of its management philosophy, an adaptive management with self-assessing dynamics that goes beyond blanket terms of success or failure outcomes. That is ready to acknowledge the value of results that are hard to measure or quantify and is willing to promote changes which are open ended and unpredictable in relation to status quo. Nevertheless, the overall maturity and accomplishments of the project seem to point out that it is possible for ACAP to move towards higher levels of social learning that can be more supportive of long-term sustainable change in Ghandruk village.
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Reference:


