



Tropentag, October 5-7, 2011, Bonn

“Development on the margin”

## Understanding the Exercise of Discretion in Community Forestry Policy Implementation: Application of Street-level Bureaucracy Theory to a Case Study from Nepal

HIMA DEVI UPRETY<sup>1</sup>, MICHAEL PREGERNIG<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>*University of Natural Resources and Life Sciences (BOKU), Institute of Forest, Environmental and Natural Resource Policy, Austria*

<sup>2</sup>*Albert-ludwigs-universität Freiburg,, Institute of Forest and Environmental Policy,*

### Abstract

The community forestry (CF) programme of Nepal is one of the oldest and allegedly most successful programs worldwide. Concurrently, policy implementation research shows that the Nepalese CF programme is still struggling with some severe implementation deficits. The forest bureaucracy in Nepal, for example, is characterised by a rather inflexible, top-down culture of decision making. Nevertheless, there is quite substantive variance in achieving CF policy goals in different parts of the country. This paper tries to explain part of this variance by focusing on one key element in the “chain of implementation”, namely the activities of front-line staff of the Department of Forest (DoF). The main aim of this paper is to examine how front-line workers exercise discretion while enforcing CF policies and to elucidate what factors influence their behaviour in their daily interactions with clients.

Conceptually, the paper draws on general insights from bottom-up approaches to policy implementation research and it employs a particular theory of this strand of research, i.e. street-level bureaucracy (SLB) theory. Building, inter alia, on the work of Michael Lipsky, SLB theory puts a special focus on public service workers who interact directly with citizens in the course of their jobs and who have substantial discretion in the execution of their work.

Methodologically, the study employs a small-N research design and mixed qualitative/quantitative investigation methods. Primary data was gathered by means of 100 semi-structured face-to-face interviews with government forest officials and 50 interviews with representatives of 45 community forest user groups.

The empirical results of the study indicate that the exercise of discretion at the front-line in CF implementation is more or less inevitable. The findings suggest that the discretionary power that street-level bureaucrats are able to exercise, is an important explanatory factor for the achievement of policy objectives at the implementation level. SLBs employ different informal procedures and strategies that help them to manage the sheer unlimited service demand from their clients, especially in the light of limited organisational resources and in presence of great leeway in CF policies. Based on these findings, some general policy-relevant conclusions are drawn.

**Keywords:** Clients, community forestry, informal behaviour, policy implementation, street-level bureaucrats