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RESEARCH

Recognising and Resisting Injustice: Knowledge Practices and Politics Amongst Nepal's Community Forestry Professionals

Sam Staddon

The future of inclusive forestry in Nepal depends on forestry professionals who can recognise patriarchal roots of gender injustice as they operate in the ideologies and apparatus of forest governance, and who can resist those injustices through their work. This paper uses the notion of knowledge practices to explore the recognition of injustice amongst Nepal's community forestry professionals, and the relationship between recognition and resistance, highlighting the inherently political nature of all knowledge practices. By drawing on over fifty interviews and ethnographic insights, this paper goes beyond the typically black-boxed and essentialised 'forestry professional' and unsettles the false dichotomy between 'the professional' and 'the personal'. Nepal's community forestry professionals represent a plurality of knowledges, emerging from unique positionalities and personal experiences; however, the demand for quantifiable, short-term project outputs (attributed to funders and donors) shuts down their opportunities to meaningfully practice their knowledges. This paper articulates how, in order to resist injustices within both forest user communities and forestry institutions, professionals are demanding a greater focus on learning—from the lived realities of forest users, from each other as practitioners, from qualitative engagements with complexity and processes of change, from so-called mistakes, and ultimately from greater reflexivity. Through such learning and reflection comes the opportunity to recognise and resist injustices and create socially just community forestry. This paper urges scholars to go beyond black-boxing those in the forestry sector, and instead to offer solidarity and support in promoting knowledge practices that recognise and resist injustices and thus help build socially just forest futures.

Keywords: community forestry; injustice; knowledge practices; Nepal; professional practice; politics; hope

Introduction

The future of inclusive community forestry in Nepal is said to depend on forestry professionals 'who can recognise subtle patriarchal roots of gender injustice'; however, this is no easy task as 'the overwhelming majority of the male workforce—in the government, civil society and private sector—has been embroiled in the patriarchal ideologies and apparatus of forest governance that have evolved over many decades' (Bhattari, 2017). This paper uses the notion of knowledge practices to explore the recognition of injustice amongst Nepal's forestry professionals, and the relationship between recognition and resistance to the patriarchal ideologies and apparatus of Nepal's forest governance. Knowledge practices have been referred to as the 'personal and social practices related to working with knowledge' (Hakkarainen, 2009: 215).[1] Illustrative of such knowledge practices, I have been told by forestry professionals in Nepal that 'it is not difficult to see marginalisation…we do know about it" but that "what we put in our reports is not the same as in reality'. These quotes highlight a tension between knowledge (i.e., recognition of injustice) and working with that knowledge (i.e., challenging ideologies and apparatus); a tension that this paper argues is due to the inherently political nature of working with knowledge. This paper unpacks this tension, and draws attention to knowledge politics as well as practices, by offering a framework for understanding the plurality of knowledges that exist within Nepal's community forestry professionals, issues of control in how those knowledges are practiced, and opportunities for resisting that control in the pursuit of social justice.

A focus on forestry professionals, rather than forest users, is significant, as whilst much work has sought to unpack the 'black box' of communities in community-based natural resource management (CBNRM) (Blaikie, 2006), the same attention has not been afforded to professionals managing those processes. Speaking of

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communities in CBNRM, Blaikie (2006: 1953) argues that:

> 'The re-designing of the local so as to render it manageable requires black-boxing and containerisation of local differences. A black box simplifies by hiding troubling complexities…[it] can also obscure social differences such as wealth, political power between households, men, women, children and ethnic minorities, and it can conceal the local politics of control and inequality' (Blaikie, 2006: 1953).

This paper seeks to unpack the 'black box' of the local professional forestry community in Nepal, in order to expose the social differences and local politics of control and inequality within it, as it is these troubling complexities that see some professionals more able—or willing—to recognise injustice than others, and some more empowered than others to incorporate that knowledge into their professional practices. Ultimately this paper seeks possibilities for more socially just community forestry by highlighting opportunities 'from within', arguing as Bhattari (2017) does, that potential for transformative change rests with community forestry professionals, and that they and their knowledge practices (and politics), rather than just the community forest users they serve, should be the focus of more scholarly attention and support.

This paper proceeds with a review of the dilemmas of justice within Nepal's community forestry programme, describing the operation of patriarchy and other social hierarchies and forms of power within community forestry users. This dilemma is positioned within wider societal challenges and shifts, all of which have relevance for community forestry professionals interested in recognising and resisting social injustices as they operate within their work. Attention is then turned to the knowledge practices of these professionals, with a review of academic critiques centred on expert and technical forestry knowledge. This paper argues however that these critiques inadvertently 'black box' (cf. Blaikie, 2006) the forestry professional community, and fail to acknowledge complexities and politics within this homogenised group. A framework for unpacking this 'black-box' is therefore offered, through an exploration of the knowledge practices (and politics) of community forestry professionals, focusing on: the plurality of knowledges; the politics of control in how those knowledges are practiced; and opportunities for resisting that control in the pursuit of social justice.

Dilemmas of justice in Nepal's community forestry

Nepal's community forestry programme of devolved forest governance was established in the 1980s, with the rights to sustainably manage and use forests being handed over to those living nearby through the creation of Community Forest User Groups (CFUGs). The programme, which has been heavily promoted and supported by international donor agencies, has continued to grow and currently encompasses 35% of Nepal's population (GoN, 2020). These CFUGs have nurtured their forests, which were often handed over in a degraded state, meaning the programme has made significant environmental and ecological gains, and is widely considered a 'success story'. Despite its goals of and efforts towards improving livelihoods and empowering women, the poor and disadvantaged groups, significant 'dilemmas of justice' remain within Nepal's community forestry, as formal provisions of equality lead to inequitable outcomes given the context of entrenched social hierarchies (Shrestha, 2016).

As with many participatory forestry programmes, the reality of Nepal's community forestry arguably represents a 'paradox of participation', that is, 'pattern[s] of increased hardships for the poorest and capture of the, often limited, benefits by local elites' (Lund, 2015: 1). 'Elite capture' is a concern in Nepal's community forestry as benefits arising from forests and forest-related projects accrue disproportionately to those who are more wealthy, better off, and powerful—characteristics that in Nepal typically coincide with literate men of so-called 'higher castes' (Ahlborg and Nightingale, 2012; Nightingale, 2005; Shrestha, 2016; Staddon et al., 2014, 2015). Work within forests and the daily use of forest products is typically practiced by those who are illiterate, men from so-called lower castes and women from all castes, and yet it is men from so-called higher castes that dominate decision-making within the CFUG, claiming authority through their ability to read official documents and to undertake financial accounting (Ahlborg and Nightingale, 2012; Nightingale, 2005). Whilst community forestry policy promotes the inclusion of women in executive CFUG committee positions, this does not automatically ensure meaningful participation, which in fact may be 'just sitting in' (Nightingale, 2002). A recent study on gender integration in Nepal's community forests finds that whilst women contribute much labour in forest related activities, their involvement in decision making is low, that women suffer from 'time poverty', and that there exist layers of exclusive leadership (including within women only CFUGs) (WOCAN, 2017). Pokharel and Tiwari (2013: 560) provide a telling example of this, relating the experience of an illiterate woman in her role as CFUG chairperson: '"the secretary and others discuss and make decisions regarding the funds and ask me to put the signature…I was not interested in becoming the chairperson, but everyone forced me into it. Forest officials and development workers said that it was a requirement of forming the committee, so I accepted the post"'. It is not only women who are marginalised in such processes; '"as uneducated and poor people we don't confront other members, as they are the people on which we depend for employment and credit"' (Pokharel and Tiwari, 2013: 560).

The dilemmas of justice and paradox of participation in Nepal's community forestry arise not simply in relation to forestry practices and institutions, but notably due to pre-existing and entrenched social hierarchies and power relations across the country. It has been said that '[g]ender disparity in Nepali society begins right after the birth'

Pokharel and Tiwari (2013), and the same may be said of disparities between castes. Nepal's hierarchical caste system is hugely complex, dating back centuries, and although discrimination according to caste became unlawful in 1962, those from so-called lower castes (including Dalits) and other disadvantaged groups (such as indigenous or Janajati/Adibasi, Madeshi, Tharu, Muslims and other minority religions) continue to face discrimination (GESI Working Group, 2017). The hard fought for Constitution of Nepal in 2015 envisages the country as an inclusive state and guarantees the right to equality for all citizens; 'eliminating discrimination based on class, caste, region, language, religion and gender and all forms of caste-based untouchability' (GESI Working Group, 2017). To turn this into a reality, however, great progressmust be made, as inequality in Nepal sees on-going disparities in wealth, education, health and political decision-making power (GESI Working Group, 2017).

Nepal has undergone radical social, cultural and political transformations over the last 30 years, including current processes of federalisation, but there is a 'huge disparity between the well-resourced, cosmopolitan capital, Kathmandu, and the still very basic living standards in other parts of the country' (Hutt, 2020: 145). Labour migration, particularly by young men, has led to the rise of a remittance economy that contributes 30% of GDP—three times that from tourism (Hutt, 2020). Migration, within Nepal and beyond, means more people are leaving rural areas to live in towns and cities, resulting in a decreasing reliance on agriculture in rural areas and a 'feminisation of agriculture', as women take on what has traditionally been considered men's work on the farm. Given the synergistic relationship between farm and forest, this agrarian change leads to shifts in the use of forests and forest products (Marquardt et al., 2016) and affects community forestry through a lack of leadership and decreasing levels of user participation (Poudel, 2019). Community forests remain a vital resource for particular groups, however, notably those from poorer households (often Dalit and Janajati) who remain in subsistence agriculture and lack opportunities for off-farm activities or to migrate for work (Marquardt et al., 2016).

Tackling dilemmas of justice in Nepal's community forestry is undoubtedly a huge challenge, involving the recognition of injustices created through everyday interactions between forests, forest users and forest institutions; and recognition of how these are positioned within ever-changing contexts and hierarchies of power. This paper contributes to this challenge by turning the analytical lens away from CFUGs and on to the professionals who design and deliver community forestry programmes and policies, specifically through a focus on their knowledge practices and its politics.

Knowledge practices (and politics) of Nepal's community forestry professionals

'Knowledge practices' have been defined above as the 'personal and social practices related to working with knowledge' (Hakkarainen, 2009: 215). As discussed at the start of this paper, a tension exists within Nepal's community forestry between knowledge (e.g., the recognition of injustice) and the ability to work with that knowledge (e.g., to challenge patriarchal ideologies and apparatus), a tension that it is argued is due to the inherently political nature of working with knowledge. This paper unpacks this tension, and draws attention to knowledge politics as well as practices, by offering a framework for understanding (i) the plurality of knowledges that exist within Nepal's community forestry professionals, (ii) issues of power and control inhow those knowledges are practiced, and (iii) opportunities for resisting that control in the pursuit of social justice. Before moving on to this framework, a brief overview of Nepal's community forestry professional community is provided, along with academic critiques related to expert and technical forestry knowledge.

Multiple actors and professionals are involved in Nepal's community forestry, including not only government departments but also donor organisations, Nepali civil society, INGOs, research and education institutions, and the private sector. Around 60% of the development budget of the community forestry programme has been funded through foreign assistance (GoN, 2020), culminating in the cross-donor Multi-Stakeholder Forestry Programme until 2015, and continuing with the likes of the World Bank Forest Investment Program (GoN, 2017). These actors have been the subject of much critique, drawing attention to the politics of knowledge, that is, whose knowledge is seen 'to count' in both community forestry policy and daily forest practices. Critiques highlight the history and hegemony of Western scientific forestry knowledge and associated practices, and the lack of genuine engagement with the knowledge and practices of forest-dependent communities—despite this being a central tenant of Nepal's community forestry (Ojha et al., 2016, Rutt et al., 2015; Toft et al., 2015). The colonial roots of forestry and the training of foresters has been highlighted as particularly problematic (Guha, 2001; Sivaramakrishnan, 1995), with Nepali foresters influenced for example through forestry training in neighbouring India. Ojha et al. (2006) discuss the dominance of a 'techno-bureaucratic doxa' in Nepal's forestry, where by the world view of forest bureaucrats based on science and technical tools goes unchallenged. Others draw attention to logics and practices of 'professionalisation' in community forestry, which it is argued promote expertise, ignore politics and work against participation, leading to observed paradoxical and inequitable outcomes (Lund, 2015; Nightingale, 2005). Such critique of forestry knowledge and professionalisation builds on a rich history of anthropologies of international development and aid more broadly, which argue that knowledge practices and processes serve to create technocratic and de-politicised approaches to what are fundamentally political issues of power and control (Li, 2007; Ferguson, 1994). This paper takes these epistemic injustices seriously and firmly agrees that development interventions can (and often do) de-politicise and further entrench inequalities (as I have found in my own work; Staddon et al., 2014; Staddon et al., 2015)). It suggests, however, that this scholarship risks

homogenising and black boxing (cf. Blaikie 2006) 'the forestry expert' or professional in what can be unhelpful ways, that is, ways that ignore 'internal' social differences and inequalities, and the politics of control within the community. A framework for unpacking that black box is therefore offered here, through a focus on the knowledge practices and politics of community forestry professionals.

(i) A plurality of positions, and thus knowledges

Knowledge practices relate to the 'personal and social' aspects of (working with) knowledge (Hakkarainen, 2009), and this points towards the importance of the knowledge-holder as an individual, as well as how they are positioned in relation to others, to their identity, positionality and perspective. Reviewing forty years of gender research and environmental policy, Arora-Jonsson (2014: 305) argues that the most important thing in tackling on-going contradictions and injustices is 'more research on knowledge producers, practitioners and policy makers—to understand how we work and our own preconceptions'. Preconceptions and perspectives arise from our unique and situated positionalities, encompassing the 'personal' and the 'professional'; as reviewed here by drawing not on forestry scholarship (given it typically fails to reflect on such issues), but rather by turning to that on international development (given community forestry is not just as an environmental protection, but also a social development programme).

Whilst there have long been calls to recognise the importance of 'the personal' in development practice (Chambers 1989), given that it is 'fuelled by the imperative to change the lives of the poor, its narratives do not usually feature changes in aid workers themselves' (Fechter, 2012: 1389). Leading postcolonial scholar Gayatri Spivak (1988) warns, however, that identity and positioning (socioeconomic, gendered, cultural, geographic, historical, institutional) and the 'baggage' carried by those engaging in development mean 'our interaction with, and representations of, the subaltern are inevitably loaded. They are determined by our favourable historical and geographic position, our material and cultural advantages resulting from imperialism and capitalism, and our identity as privileged' (Kapoor, 2004: 627). The 'inevitably loaded' nature of development practice, and the importance of positionality and privilege is captured in a 2019 podcast entitled The currency of power: Addressing power dynamics within development, which features a discussion between two senior practitioners, who share that 'I'm white. I'm male. I'm heterosexual. I have enough money to, to not worry about falling asleep hungry. All of those things—I'm not set up to listen well. I'm not set up to understand that well' (Fine, 2019). Such discussions reflect the 'intersectional' nature of identities; for example, cutting across gender, race and class, and the relevance of these for how we come to understand—and thus our perspectives on and knowledge of—people, places and processes (Crenshaw, 1989). Whilst much development—and forestry—practice engages increasingly sophisticated understandings of intersectionality (Colfer et al., 2018), the same attention, it can be argued, has not been paid to the significance of professionals own intersectional identities.

One group of development practitioners who have been interrogated in relation to their identity are so-called expatriate or international workers, with work highlighting for example the colonial continuities embodied in their 'lifestyle dilemmas', given they 'inherited from colonial times a pattern of home and social life that excludes contact with the people living in poverty they are there to help' (Eyben, 2014: 45). Mosse (2014: 517), however, argues that the idea of development as being dominated by a Western knowledge regime 'arriving from the outside is decreasingly relevant or helpful', and scholarly attention is shifting to explore the identities, lived experiences and knowledge practices of not just international but also national staff. In the podcast referred to above (Fine 2019), the speakers complicate assumptions of connections between nationality and knowledge, however:

> 'One of the knowledge gaps that I've experienced working overseas is where you have local leaders who are a part of an educated elite. And they've grown up in the city. They're often the children of government officials and of university professors and the elite of that society. And it's not uncommon, in my experience, for that group to have less knowledge about conditions outside of the capital city or the urban centre than some of the expatriates who have been living out in the rural areas for 5 or 10 years…who've immersed themselves in the culture and who have a real personal understanding of the dynamics of community life' (Fine, 2019).

This is of course not always the case, but as Warne Peters (2020: 3) suggests,'it is not entirely clear which side of the "development encounter" national staff are on—are they part of the global North because of their interventionist efforts, skills, training or experience, or part of the global South because they are citizens of a developing country?'. She notes an 'internal' hierarchy of field staff (i.e., those working face-to-face with beneficiaries) and administrative staff (i.e., those managing project implementation), and complex dynamics of understanding and representation of project sites and realities between field site and administrative centre. Focusing on development and gender in India, Narayanaswamy (2016) similarly highlights a disconnect between the needs and desires of marginalised women across the south of the country and the ways these are defined and intervened in by urban, middle-class and middle/upper-caste development professionals in Delhi, based on their 'elite feminisms' and personal assumptions, including for example their own marriage and family practices.

Such literatures and arguments inspire in this paper an attention to the positionalities and personal experiences of Nepal's community forestry professionals, and how this affects their knowledges and understandings. This is particularly in light of the 'huge disparity' between cosmopolitan Kathmandu—where most professionals

reside—and the 'still very basic living standards' across much of the rest of the country (Hutt, 2020: 145), where community forestry takes place. Rather than assuming however that community forestry professionals have particular perspectives and knowledges based solely on their training or chosen career—or based on their place of residence—this paper seeks to articulate and acknowledge the plurality of their knowledges, based on their diverse and intersectional identities, and their unique experiences, both in 'personal' and 'professional' capacities.

(ii) Politics and control of knowledge practices

It is clear that Nepal's community forestry professionals may embody not just technical forestry expertise, but also a plurality of knowledges, experiences and insights, arising from their diverse positionalities. When considering knowledge practices, as outlined above, however, there exists a tension between knowledge and the ability to work with that knowledge, a tension that it is argued is due to the inherently political nature of working with knowledge, that is, of any knowledge practices. As outlined above, the knowledge politics of Nepal's community forestry programme has received excellent critique, highlighting the history and hegemony of Western and colonial scientific forestry knowledges and practices, and a prevalent 'techno-bureaucratic doxa' amongst an increasingly 'professionalised' forest bureaucracy (Ojha et al., 2016; Ojha et al., 2006; Nightingale, 2005). Given the focus in this paper on understanding the diversity within the forest bureaucracy however, the review here highlights literature that points towards processes through which diverse and plural knowledges may be controlled – either enabled or constrained – within Nepal's community forestry practices.

Forestry is typical of many other environment and development sectors in being dominated by technocratic approaches and positivist epistemologies; as Resurreccion and Elmhirst (2020: 2) write, 'technical, evidence-based and managerialist approaches dominate, based on the use of statistical indicators and impacts, hard evidence and rigorous data'. Neoliberal agendas and demands promote very particular ways of understanding the world, of framing what interventions are required, of measuring and monitoring the consequences of those interventions, and of evaluating and learning from them to feed into further interventions. 'Results' and 'evidence' of development interventions variously take the form of key performance indicators, logical framework analysis ('log-frames'), risk registers, theories of change (ToCs), and randomised control trials (RCTs), to name but a few (Eyben 2015). The adoption of such measures and methodologies is tied to the increasing demand for development actors to demonstrate accountability, legitimacy, credibility (King et al., 2016), as well as value for money (VFM) and for payments by results (PBR) schemes (Eyben 2015). In The Tyranny of Metrics, Muller (2018) critiques the current global obsession with metrics, or 'metric madness', arguing that whilst intended to provide an 'objective', standardised assessment that enables comparison across time and space, such metrics tend to promote quantitative measures over qualitative understandings, and to replace personal judgement based on experience and talent. This paper is keen to explore how technical, evidence-based and metricised approaches to community forestry in Nepal may control (i.e., open up or shut down) opportunities for the recognition of injustices, such as qualitative understandings and knowledge based on personal judgement, experience and talent.

Whilst many would agree that formulaic, routinized practices and prescriptive methodologies dominate much development practice (Eyben et al., 2015; Hayman et al., 2016), some choose to focus on the role of development knowledge as 'part of the critique [of development, but also] part of the solution' (King et al., 2016: 1). Eager to disrupt the conceptualisation of NGOs as united and coherent actors, Kontinen (2016) explores development knowledges, finding two forms in operation; firstly 'propositional knowledge'—that which relates to organisations rules and routines and which is embedded in manuals and reporting templates and the like—and secondly 'narrative knowledge'—that which is informal and unstructured and consists of stories and anecdotes based on more personal experiences and actions. Kontinen highlights a tension between the use of propositional versus narrative forms of knowledge, however, noting that knowledge based on friendship (a form of narrative knowledge) is seen by practitioners as more valid and 'real' than propositional knowledge contained in, for example, monitoring and evaluation tools. Such narrative knowledge often emerges within so-called informal spaces, for example whilst practitioners participate in daily activities with local partners or communities or during discussions over shared food. This paper is keen to explore these different forms of knowledge as they may operate within community forestry professionals in Nepal, seeking to understand how (and where) they arise and how they are controlled through professional practices and politics.

(iii) Resisting control of knowledge practices

Nepal's community forestry professionals clearly embody multiple knowledges based on their intersectional positionalities and experiences, and clearly these knowledges operate within systems and spaces which may open-up or shut-down opportunities to recognise and tackle social injustices through their work. This final part of the framework explores the ways in which professionals may resist control of their knowledge practices in the pursuit of social justice. In his seminal work The Anti-Politics Machine, Ferguson (1994) writes that "[t]he thoughts and actions of "development" bureaucrats are powerfully shaped by the world of acceptable statements and utterances within which they live; and what they do and not do is a product not only of the interests of various nations, classes, or international agencies, but also, and at the same time, of a working out of this complex structure of knowledge" (Ferguson, 1994: 18, emphasis added). This paper recognises the powerful shaping of Nepal's community forestry professionals' thoughts and actions, but seeks to explore their 'working out of this complex structure of knowledge', paying particular attention

to how they work out ways of resisting dominating structures which constrain opportunities to engage with social justice in meaningful ways.

Discussing the role of 'gender experts' within the work of environment and development organisations, Resurreccion and Elmhirst (2020: 8) highlight a tension between scholarship that, on the one hand, pits feminist activists ('who work as "trojan horses" for feminism') against femocrats ('complicit in bureaucratising feminism and in the loss of its transformative edge'), and on the other hand, that which troubles the apparent boundary between these two charactertured positions and soresists these binaries. Rejecting simple dichotomies between 'good feminism' and 'co-opted feminism', Resurreccion and Elmhirst (2020) argue for the importance of experts' multiple positions in and through their daily working practices, and of a 'slow revolution', citing Davids et al. (2014: 404) that change comes through 'small, messy, fragmented and everyday kinds of subversions, conscious and unconscious'. Drawing on feminist theory in order to consider social justice in relation to REDD+, Bee and Basnet (2017: 797) highlight the inadequacy of current REDD+ pilot initiatives, concluding, similarly, that 'the key, then, is to identify possible points of reversal or switches, whereby potential openings for struggle and contestation occur…such that moments to challenge the depoliticisation of gender become evident'.) Exploring the ability of 'justice brokers' from state and local civil society actors to influence national REDD+ agendas and programmes, Dawson et al. (2018) find that although these actors hold extensive and in-depth knowledge on issues of (in)justice and (in)equality, decision-making is dominated by international actors, and their 'tick box approaches to equity', which restricts space for deliberation, leading them to call for 'effective spaces for empowering diverse intermediaries to negotiate and influence localisation of international norms' (Dawson et al., 2018: 1).

Such scholarship and findings align well with the field of 'reflective learning', which is defined as 'a deliberate process of becoming unsettled about what is normal…and recognising that…how [one] personally understand[s] and act[s] in the world is shaped by the interplay of history, power and relationships' (Eyben, 2014: 20). Recognising individual and collective agency, reflective learning is considered an opportunity for 'finding room for manoeuver to push back and create the space for alternative framings' (Eyben, 2015: 34). In their book Negotiating Gender Expertise in Environment and Development: Voices from Feminist Political Ecology, Resurreccion and Elmhirst (2020: 227) conclude that 'vigilance and reflexivity help resist hegemonising rationalities that depoliticise and technocratise the work of advancing gender equality in technical environments', such as in community forestry. This work inspires an attention in this paper to everyday opportunities and spaces through which Nepal's community forestry professionals may 'push back' against, resist and remain 'vigilant' about depoliticising and technocratising practices, and who through reflexivity are able to work to resist social injustices in Nepal's community forestry.

Methodology

This paper is based on research conducted in Nepal during 2017 and 2018 involving interviews with over 50 professionals from 35 organisations representing community forestry interests from government, donors, INGOs, civil society, consultancies, policy and research think tanks, and academia. Interviewees included men and women from Nepal from a wide range of castes, as well as a small number of foreign workers based in Nepal and visiting international consultants and academics. I spent over a year conducting research for my PhD in Nepal during 2007 and 2008, and so some interviewees were people I knew from that time; others worked for organisations I had looked up as being relevant to the research, and I also spoke to people who were recommended to me during my visits. Meetings took place in Kathmandu (the capital of Nepal) in practitioner's offices, although in some cases in cafes, and whilst most were one-to-one, some involved up to three or four participants from the same organisation. Whilst I can speak some Nepali, interviews were conducted in English, and on only one occasion did participants struggle to express themselves and require translation to Nepali, which was offered by their colleagues. Discussions lasted from around one to two hours and were based loosely on a set of topics that aimed to elicit participants' experiences and perspectives on equality and social inclusion in relation to community forestry and on processes of learning within forestry practice and institutions. Interviews were not audio-recorded and instead notes were taken during the meeting, as well as afterwards when insights and reflections were fresh. Some things said by participants were noted verbatim during the interview and are presented below as direct quotes. Participants' free and prior-informed consent to conduct the interviews was obtained verbally at the start of the meeting, and I assured all interviewees of anonymity and confidentiality. The research presented here was approved by the School of GeoSciences University of Edinburgh Ethics & Integrity Committee.

During 2017 and 2018 I spent seven weeks in Nepal over three separate trips in order to conduct the interviews. During this time, I also participated in a number of workshops, conferences and seminars and used these participant observation opportunities to gain additional ethnographic insights. I did so in recognition of the fluidity of boundaries of what constitutes 'field work' sites, and in order to exercise 'deep-listening' and 'intellectual humility' wherever possible (Koch, 2020). In presenting my findings below, I make numerical reference to my own notes but do not provide details of the interviewee (by gender or sector for example) or where the material arose from (interviews or participant observation). This is done in order to protect anonymity and maintain confidentiality, but also because I make no claims over representativeness; rather, I offer the material as a way to demonstrate the diversity and breadth of understanding and opinion and not to claim particular groups think differently to others. Analysis of material was qualitative and iterative, based broadly on my past research insights (Staddon et al., 2014; 2015) and literature reviewed above, specifically each of my three

visits to Nepal in 2017 and 2018. The findings presented below aim to tell a wide-ranging story of insights and interests—they do not allow an in-depth consideration of positionality and practice in a particular professional or project and the direct consequences this has for injustices; they seek to demonstrate a widespread feeling and frustration, which may or may not be shared by others. This research would no doubt be improved and more insightful had I had chance to engage with professionals working outside of Kathmandu, and to follow particular projects or people over time. This research is however a snapshot of professionals' perspective at a particular moment in time, notable for coinciding with the beginnings of processes of federalism and devolution of political powers and for coming before the global COVID-19 pandemic beginning in 2020.

Findings

This paper unpacks the 'black box' (cf. Blaikie, 2006) of Nepal's community forestry professionals, finding that these professionals are indeed a diverse group and represent a plurality of knowledges. Their knowledge and understanding, specifically of issues of inequality and injustice in relation to Nepal's community forests (both at community and institutional level), takes multiple forms and emerges from their unique positionalities, reflecting both their 'personal' and 'professional' lives. What emerged time and again during interviews, however, was the struggle professionals faced in applying their knowledge, understanding and recognition of injustices in their everyday professional practice. The challenges and politics embedded in forestry professionals' knowledge practices are explored here, in line with the framework set out above; firstly by focusing on the 'social differences' (cf. Blaikie, 2006) within the professional community and exposing the plurality of professional knowledge practices; secondly by revealing the 'local politics of control and inequality' (cf. Blaikie, 2006) within the professional community; and thirdly by highlighting where particular knowledge practices promote recognition of injustice and allow it to be resisted, thereby 'pushing back' (Eyben, 2015) against the patriarchal ideologies and governance apparatus that currently close down inclusive forest futures (Bhattari, 2017).

A plurality of knowledge practices and the recognition of injustice

Nepal's community forestry professionals represent a plurality of knowledge practices, with some more able than others to recognise injustices and social inequalities at the community, and institutional, level. There is widespread recognition that the ways in which the professional community think about and understand issues of inequality are important. It was noted that 'it is not difficult to see marginalisation…we do know about it' (3/39), with one example relaying that despite government provisions for the percentage of women on committee positions in CFUGs, that their involvement constitutes murti or 'statue participation', as men still dominate discussions (1/139). Others shared similar reflections on the state of women's involvement in community forestry, that despite the formal arrangements for decision making, that 'all matter is decided in informal settings…when sitting, drinking, men decide, then next day they go to the meeting and input the decision they made' (2/36). Whilst it was thought that all in the professional community know of such challenges in tackling inequalities (2/36), some respondents drew attention to problematic assumptions held by others (1/35; 1/43) as they reveal a lack of understanding of processes of marginalisation. Discussing federalism processes and the need for there to be a woman in one of the two local level political positions (Mayor or Deputy Mayor), one respondent suggested there are widespread assumptions that women lack capacity to perform those roles, whilst no such assumptions circulate about the capacities of men (3/56). Clearly, there is diversity in the recognition of inequalities and injustice associated with community forestry, and here Iunpack why that might be by exploring the influence of positionality and the 'personal' amongst community forestry professionals.

Formal education and training emerged as an important theme in respondents' thinking and understanding, with many people noting that they studied outside of Nepal for undergraduate and Master's degrees; for example in Canada (1/143), UK (3/13; 3/48; 3/60), Netherlands (1/148), Germany (3/48), and Thailand (2/27). Many benefited from donor-provided scholarships to study overseas during the 1990s, with ideas gained during those times still central to their current day professional practices (1/143). Some noted a lack of focus on issues of equality and justice in their environmentally focused degrees (1/58), whilst others noted that their involvement in student politics during their studies made up for this gap (1/58). The obvious influence of education on people's current professional practices and perspectives was revealed by some:'I'm instinctively drawn to finance-based approaches…[and] I think it appealed to her accountancy mind' (3/10). It emerged that education was important not purely for its content and focus, however, but also because of the connections it established. Respondents mentioned, for example, sharing a room with peers in the professional community during their undergraduate studies i.e. being a 'batch-mate' (3/62), and how they still run into old colleagues from their early forestry training in neighbouring India (1/86). These relationships are significant as from them emerge trust in both individuals and disciplines; I was told, for example, that government foresters only respect those with forestry degrees (2/11) and that sociologists are not well respected (2/136). A lack of social scientists within forestry and environment organisations was noted (3/63), as was a lack of critical social science more broadly, although others highlighted the potential of PhDs (particularly those completed outside of Nepal) as being valuable for promoting critical thinking around issues of justice (1/125; 3/27; 3/57).

Following on from their education and training, people's work experiences emerged as important in their understanding and ideas, with respondents naming particular organisations and projects that they had worked for as being influential in their current thinking (2/43; 3/48). Again, the relational aspect of these experiences

was important, with people speaking of the access through their own organisations to those in others, enabling them to further widen their learning experience (3/49). Others highlighted the importance of having worked in specific places, most notably in rural and remote areas of Nepal, for example, as Forest Technicians or District Forest Officers (DFOs) (3/48; 1/100). Whilst DFOs may view their posting to remote districts of Nepal as something to endure until they can finally move to Kathmandu (1/100), the importance of this time spent in close proximity to community forests and their user groups, is seen as hugely important by both these government officers (3/14) and others in the professional community (1/36). These opportunities were seen as significant in allowing people to come to know and understand local social and political relations, and processes of marginalisation. Respondents bemoaned the lack of experience of rural areas amongst certain professionals (1/109), although this was connected to their personal background too.

Whilst the term positionality was not mentioned directly by any respondent, many discussed the importance of personal characteristics, identity and approach. One respondent acknowledged that coming from an urban middle-class background they were unaware of the situation for those across rural Nepal, sharing their surprise when they went to work in those areas and the inequality between their own life and the lives of many fellow Nepalis (2/126). This is to be expected given the growing disparity between Kathmandu and rural and remote parts of Nepal (Hutt, 2020); however, it is increasingly important in terms of how professionals come to know about the understand processes of marginalisation and inequality. As Narayanaswamy (2016) finds in India, it is possible for professionals to lack insight into the lived realities of those who are marginalised, even within their own countries, which has consequences for the interventions they engage in. Other professionals have grown up in rural parts of the country, and many of these drew on their own past and present experiences in those areas in explaining their approach to questions of social inclusion and equality (2/115). It is common practice that in community-facing project work, organisations employ people from the same district, but a different site, so that they are aware of the local culture and language, yet are not known to the community personally (2/27). I heard of one project that specifically employed young graduates from across a range of disciplines and locations, in order that they bring 'no baggage', with their selection being based on personality and a desire to provide them with exposure to different places (3/19). Personality is considered by some to be an important aspect of positionality (Moser, 2008), and some respondents were well aware of this, reflecting on the importance of empathy and how in touch people are with their situation (2/27). One respondent told me that they 'like to talk', going on to explain that talking to everyone in a community when they visit a project site is the how they obtain information, and that informal conversations are much more valuable than large formal meetings (3/53). This approach highlights the importance of what has been referred to as 'narrative knowledge' (Kontinen, 2016), and the importance of 'informal' spaces in its generation. Others discussed their personal approaches and the importance of particular spaces, for example one international worker who chose not to live in 'expat areas' of Kathmandu (1/108), so trying to avoid the trap discussed by Eyben (2015) of separating themselves from the lived realities of many in the country.

Professionals' experiences and identities also emerged in relation to their personal relationships with family and friends, and stories of these relationships were frequently offered by respondents when discussing issues of inclusion and equality. A number of professional women who had chosen to leave Nepal and work across South East Asia, spoke during short work trips back to Nepal about their choices to work abroad in relation to their mother-in-laws, saying they would not want to live in Nepal as they would be dominated by them at home, whilst when working overseas they enjoyed freedom and independence (3/36). These personal experiences of marginalisation mirror those of women across Nepal's rural community forests, where intra-household dynamics and authority determine not only relations between women based on age and position in the family, but as a consequence the women's relationships with the forest and forest governance, for example who is responsible for collecting leaf litter vs attending CFUG meetings (Bee and Basnett, 2017; Nightingale, 2006). Professionals' personal experience of such intra-household power relations and inequalities it could be argued 'sets them up well to understand' (cf. Fine, 2019) the importance of processes of marginalisation and injustice in the community forests they work in. Other respondents also gave examples of equality within their own homes, between husbands and wives, when discussing wider issues of inclusion (2/194), whilst others referred to their own experiences of migration when discussing the impacts of migration on community forests (2/114). There was recognition of inequalities within patterns of migration however, and of identities as privileged, with one professional describing their own experiences as being amongst the '10% elite' migrants (2/114), and another describing their children's experience of migrating to Europe for university as an upper-class practice, compared to migration of the middle classes to the Middle East and lower classes to become the urban poor within Nepal (1/60). Family is clearly an important reference point for many professionals in their understanding of equality, including in direct relation to community forests. In arguing the need to promote income generating activities in community forests, one government official justified this by stating that 'I couldn't invite my brother to come and work in the forest, as there is not enough money in it' (3/15). Relationships and experiences beyond the family were also significant, with one international professional speaking about the importance of taxi rides for talking to the driver, who 'always have some story of having been to Qatar or somewhere', thereby providing an opportunity to learn about the lives of others which would not be possible if driving in UN vehicles or staying in high end hotels (1/109). The same professional also found the canteen in

the government forestry offices the place they have the most revealing chats with government foresters (1/108). Others similarly shared stories of learning through talking to people they sat next to on buses and planes (2/122; 2/181). These examples also highlight the importance of narrative knowledge and of informal spaces in the emergence of professionals' understandings—including, but not restricted to, issues of inequality (Kontinen, 2016).

Professionals' knowledge and understanding of equality and justice stems not just from direct insights offered through personal experience or talking with others, but also from emotional engagements. Speaking about the situation of those from the rural village in which they were born and still have family, one professional shared how villagers talk to them of their fear of so many young people migrating and leaving the village, and of how emotions drive the decisions and experiences of migration for all involved: 'it starts with a lot of hope, then fear, pain, and then hope again'(2/115). Others spoke of being 'saddened' by reports on the inclusion of women in community forestry (1/139) and how inequalities are 'tortuous for us' (3/12), suggesting, 'we have to struggle' (3/34). Some international consultants described doing evaluations of other organisations' projects as 'soul-destroying', especially when they did not get to visit the project sites but merely reviewed reports (1/104). Sharing how through their work they heard the story of a woman in their project site, one professional described it as 'so inspiring!' (2/45). Clearly emotions are entangled in, and productive of, the relationships which professionals have with issues of injustice and their own professional practices (Ahmed, 2004; Wright, 2012).

By focusing on the 'social differences' (cf. Blaikie, 2006) within the professional community, this section has exposed the plurality of knowledge practices amongst Nepals' community forestry professionals. Clearly many professionals are keenly aware of processes of marginalisation within community forests, and for example the murti or 'statue participation' evident in CFUGs. Professionals' awareness and understanding emerges not just from propositional knowledge associated with manuals and frameworks, but also from narrative knowledge associated with informal engagements with project beneficiaries and for example friendships with others in the professional community (Kontinen, 2016). Going further than that however, we can see professionals' knowledge and understanding emerging in direct relation to their unique positionality and identity, for example, as part of the urban middle classes, or as daughter-in-law, or father. This positionality, and the 'baggage' that comes with that (Kapoor, 2004), sets some professionals up well to listen to and understand those who are disempowered (Fine, 2019); however, it is not the intention here to claim that sharing an identity as, for example, a woman automatically sets up a professional to understand the needs of women in the community forests she works with—intersectional feminist insights are far too well established to allow such simplistic and essentialist interpretations. Findings suggest that features such as education, work experiences and emotions influence positionality and identity, from which emerge particular understandings and appreciations across the professional community—however, there is an ambivalence to this process, and it cannot be used to predict particular individuals' perspective or, for example, recognition of injustice. Findings presented here help to articulate the importance of other underlying factors such as space; for example, so-called 'informal' spaces—such as canteens or on planes—where knowledge is shared and relationships are built. The most significant underlying factor is that of relationality—that professionals' knowledge is built through a relational process, involving particular people and places and practices (Mosse, 2015). Despite the richness of professionals experiences of and insights into inequalities, professional practices and procedures were often seen to shut down opportunities to tackle them meaningfully through projects and interventions. We now move on to consider the 'local politics of control and inequality' (cf. Blaikie, 2006) within the professional community, whereby particular knowledge practices dominate others, to the detriment of recognising and resisting inequalities.

Control of knowledge practices and the shutting down of recognition

Knowledge practices involve 'working with knowledge' (Hakkarainen, 2009), and whilst it was established above that professionals 'do know about' marginalisation, and that 'it is not difficult to see', the ability to 'work with' this knowledge is not assured. One respondent captures this dilemma succinctly when stating, 'what we put in our reports is not the same as in reality' (3/50). Discussing quotas for women in CFUG leadership positions, this professional questioned 'but how do you know what is behind this?'(3/50). Many respondents bemoaned the ever-increasing focus on numbers and quantifiable project and programme impacts, calling it a 'numbers game' (2/107) and that it 'is all about playing with numbers now' (1/78), arguing that numbers 'don't contain the full story', that 'experiences cannot be contained by 50%' (2/46), and that 'there are multiple realities—and they cannot all be squeezed into one number' (2/26). Those who have been working in Nepal's forestry and development sector for many years argued that demands for numbers and metrics is increasing, maintaining that 10 or 15 years ago things were better as there was more flexibility and a focus on process rather than outputs (1/78; 2/134). They argued that statistics are not objective, 'despite assumptions' to the contrary (1/78), and that rather than counting the numbers of individuals involved in projects there should be a focus on stories, case-studies and qualitative understandings of the processes of engagement (2/12; 2/46; 2/107; 1/186). It was suggested that statistical data 'cannot capture the struggles, emotions we go through' (2/46) and that it promotes only superficial rather than deeper learning, shutting down opportunities to learn from mistakes and improve interventions (2/107). Respondents claimed that demands for accountability through project monitoring and evaluation (M&E) has 'created a monster', arguing that the system rewards those who are upwardly accountable, but gives no consideration

of accountability down to communities (3/39). It was argued that project outcomes need to be better analysed and understood, as they claimed projects can currently be undertaken with no understanding of why they are being conducted or if/how they are relevant to the communities involved (1/153). The need for more qualitative and reflective analysis of projects and professional practices (i.e., within forestry and development organisations) was highlighted, in order that processes of change are better understood (1/79).

This frustration with metrics, numbers and targets—over stories and qualitative understandings of processes of change—is well established in international development (Eyben et al., 2015; Hayman et al., 2016), but respondents in this study located responsibility for the hegemony of these practices specifically with funders and donor organisations operating in Nepal (2/44; 3/9; 3/17). Respondents argued that donors demand quick results but fund only short-term projects (1/141; 1/154), and have greater scrutiny of project finances than project outcomes (1/154). Some donors ran much longer-term programmes in the past, causing one professional to ask 'how can they forget their own history?' (1/154). It was claimed that the Nepali government will not say no to donors (1/167), and that even research work is driven by donors (2/123), although donor projects are often inaccessible to smaller NGOs and civil society organisations, as funding pots are so large and come with complex contractual demands (2/123). It was argued that donors 'do not know the reality or local context' (2/194), and that they take their cues from global level narratives and ideas, rather than local contexts (2/44), and regard their accountability as elsewhere, that is, to those living in donor countries (3/8). Claims of donor funding allocation being linked to political affiliation were common (1/135; 2/122; 3/33). It is clear that many professionals hold donors and funders responsible for creating and perpetuating hegemonic forestry knowledge practices that are inadequate in tackling inequalities.

One of the ways in which current knowledge practices are seen to be inadequate, is in connection to time spent in different project spaces, namely time spent by professionals in offices and headquarters in Kathmandu versus 'in the field' with project beneficiaries; as well as which projects sites are visited when travel does take place. Many respondents—most of whom are primarily based in Kathmandu—spoke about the importance of spending time in project sites and getting to engage with community and project members, even though local 'social mobilisers' and project staff are involved on a daily basis (1/180; 3/10; 2/34). The importance of taking senior project staff and government ministries to project sites was highlighted, not only so they can see the local context, but also so communities can make demands of them (1/97). Some professionals were frustrated, however, with the lack of time spent in the field by senior staff, for example from the UK's aid agency FCDO (formerly DfID), claiming that despite their clear intellectual abilities, they live 'in a bubble' in Kathmandu, going only on short, close-by 'field trips' in which they only visit 'successful' sites (3/7). Others too spoke of project staff visiting the same small number of sites again and again; those deemed to be 'successful', where community members 'know what to tell you to make you happy' (2/181). They argued that greater learning is to be had by visiting sites of projects that were unsuccessful, and highlighted that current practice leads to generalisations based on very limited experience (1/133; 2/181). Others noted the diversity that exists across Nepal, bot socially and geographically, warning that 'we see only the tip of the iceberg and assume it is all the same' (1/147). One professional shared a story of how they eventually persuaded a senior government official to visit a particular remote, seldom-visited project site, and how when they did they were happy to admit that 'now I see what you're talking about!' (1/34). Professional's personal embodied experiences in particular project spaces is clearly important to their knowledge and understanding of community dynamics and how project interventions intersect with those, either to promote or resist inequalities. This highlights the in-country divisions in knowledge production discussed by Warne-Peters (2020), and the need to unpack global knowledge politics to consider the spaces within which knowledge circulates.

The ability of professionals to 'work with their knowledge' and engage in knowledge practices which are meaningful to them, reflects not only embodied experiences in project sites, but also the culture and composition of their own—and other—organisations. It was argued that whilst donors see issues of diversity and inclusion at the community level, they miss it at the institutional level (1/121; 1/135; 3/44). Some professionals directly accused particular organisations of being dominated by men from so-called higher castes, despite the fact that their work involves promoting user rights (1/121). Despite a constitution that demands women hold half of their leadership positions, it was claimed that at high-level meetings, for example with the World Bank, it is only Brahmin and Chhetri men from this organisation that are present, which the organisation explains as being because women are good at meetings at a more local level (1/121). Whilst particular organisations give priority to women in recruitment (2/35), it was highlighted that due to cultural norms it is still hard for women working in rural areas, as teams are typically dominated by men and there is risk of sexual harassment, leading to many professional women wishing to work in cities where there is greater safety and amenities (2/52). Just as labour within community forests is gendered, with women typically collecting leaf litter and firewood closer to some, whilst men harvest timber from further away, labour practices amongst forestry staff also appear to be gendered, with men patrolling and monitoring whilst women work in plantations. This was explained to me as being because the men's work involved them walking for long periods of time over large distances, whereas the women's work was performed closer to the office (2/68). This apparent contradiction highlights the ingrained nature of social relations of inclusion and exclusion in Nepal, and the long-term nature of the challenge of promoting greater equality in community forestry (Nightingale, 2006; Staddon, 2014). A professionals'

position in terms of being 'set up well' to listen to and understand (Fine, 2019) processes of marginalisation clearly reflects not only their own individual positionality and experiences, but also the opportunities and obstacles established through their work environments and associated professional practices.

Control of knowledge practices also lies with the resources and support directly offered to professionals working to promote social inclusion and equality. Many forestry and development organisations operating in Nepal nominate a member of staff to be the gender or gender equality and social inclusion (GESI) 'focal point'. Whilst the creation of this role is a welcome step towards tackling issues of equality and inclusion, some respondents complained that the role is often trivialised and under-resourced, creating real challenges for those taking up the position. The role of gender or GESI focal point is typically given to women, and respondents spoke about the lack of training or additional work time given to people in order to allow them to perform the role well (2/141; 2/53). The focal points are often isolated within their own organisations, which tend to be dominated by foresters (2/143), and they face resentment from those who either see gender and social inclusion as unimportant, or who argue that they are already working on it (2/38). It was suggested by one respondent that this is partly due to misunderstanding of what is involved in promoting equality and inclusion, and partly due to the wider culture of patriarchy (2/141). Another respondent referred to a newspaper article which captured the ingrained culture of patriarchy through its title; 'Staff call men "Sir", but women "Sister"' (3/11). This refers to the Nepali tradition of calling women of a similar age didi (sister) but highlights the importance of everyday relationships and language in the recreation of subjectivities and power relations. A number of respondents highlighted the importance of those in positions of leadership, and their ability to support or hinder efforts to promote equality and inclusion, in part depending on their desire to engage with the complexity involved (3/6; 1/124; 2/30). Others highlighted that social mobilisers, employed to manage projects in the field, are typically given too much work to do, meaning they are unable to deal with the nuance of gender and equality (2/134). Resources are also important with regards professionals' own existential needs, and a number of respondents shared that they had to take on work that they did not agree with (due to the knowledge practices involved, which they felt to be further entrenching inequalities) because of their own needs to provide for themselves and their families (1/137; 2/122; 1/123; 3/42).

Professionals' ability to 'work with' their knowledge (Hakkarainen, 2009) in a way that is meaningful to them, where they feel they are promoting equality and justice, is clearly determined by a multitude of factors. Some of these controlling factors are discussed above and highlight that dominant knowledge practices do not typically reflect professionals' intentions or ignorance of inequalities, but rather institutional practices and processes (including minimal time in the field, dominance of metrics and short-term outputs, and organisational culture). Responsibility for hegemonic knowledge practices is laid clearly with funders and donors, although as one professional said 'our job is to look at ourselves too', and to consider ways of doing things differently (1/64), and this is the focus of the next and final section.

Resisting inequalities through reflective knowledge practices

It is argued above that dominant knowledge practices shut down opportunities to recognise inequalities and injustices in Nepal's community forests; however, there exist various forms of resistance to the status quo. Particular professionals, practices and approaches are remaining vigilant and reflexive (Resurreccion and Elmhirst, 2020) and 'pushing back' (Eyben, 2015) in order to promote recognition of injustice and allow it to be resisted, at both the community and institutional level. Whilst many organisations do not promote freedom to reflect on current knowledge practices, and thus 'do not allow you to be a change agent' (3/42), professionals find ways to resist and do things differently, for example by focusing on forest user narratives and differences between them, by rejecting simplistic linear trajectories of change, and by 'rather than giving answers I ask more questions' (2/115). Others spoke about their drive to always be 'hearing stories of women' and of searching for nuance, and of encouraging others to use case-study approaches to understand project impacts (2/40). A willingness to embrace complexity in order to learn about processes of change and consequences of project—both positive and negative—was evident in all professionals who saw the need to resist dominant knowledge practices.

Project and intervention 'success' to many respondents related to their meaningful engagement with processes of inequality and marginalisation, and one respondent suggested that their focus on building on existing relationships and communicating early led to such success (2/186). Others similarly highlighted the importance of communication and relationships, speaking about the importance of language and recalling how discussion at a project site changed instantly when the language employed switched from Nepali to the local language—everyone present joined in, there was animated body language, and discussion involved establishing familial connections to the facilitator (3/9). The respondent shared that this story was repeated in all of a series of three or four workshops, emphasising the importance of positionality and of development as being about the building of relationships (see section (a) above) (Mosse, 2015). The relational aspects of interventions were highlighted by others, arguing for the greater success of projects which take a 'process approach', involving following and learning from communities (1/141) and greater responsiveness and flexibility than is normally afforded in projects (2/186). It emerged that successful projects were seen by many professionals to be small scale, action research projects that did not involve pre-defined impact pathways or log frames outlining expected outcomes (2/186; 2/42; 3/21). Often these projects were pilot projects (1/73; 3/21) and

those established with small 'spare pots of money' (2/134; 2/42), which promoted freedom, flexibility and lack of reporting structures. These projects emerged as the ones professionals expressed enjoyment and fulfilment at working on (3/21; 2/45), although it emerged that it is hard to secure funds for such process-oriented, small-scale but longer-term projects (1/73).

The longevity, of not only projects but also careers, emerged as important in professionals' abilities to resist dominant knowledge practices and to recognise and resist injustices. When discussing how respondents come to know about and understand issues of inequality, many replied simply that it was because of their long experience (1/43; 3/14; 3/41; 3/30), from which some commented on how much had changed (3/14) whilst others noted the continuities with the past, and how processes of marginalisation they saw in their early careers in the 1990s still operate today (3/41). People also spoke about the freedoms they enjoy with seniority, including in being able to be more selective over the jobs they take (1/105) and to negotiate their terms (3/43), and of having greater confidence and authority in challenging instances of discrimination, both at the institutional and community level (3/12; 3/43). Seniority is therefore an important aspect of positionality and personal experience (see section (a) above), but not only in the provision of in-depth knowledge but also for the confidence and freedom in 'working with' that knowledge. More junior professionals spoke of their frustration with their lack of freedom, and the disappointment they and peers felt until they were middle-aged/mid-career (2/181). One professional shared their frustration earlier in their career with the professional practices within their organisation, as given their junior position they were not empowered to challenge them; 'that's why I left – there was no reflection!' (3/42).

Along with a willingness to embrace complexity and a desire for process-oriented projects and qualitative understandings, the dominant sentiment to emerge from professionals was a longing for greater learning. Learning, it was said, could be encouraged through greater engagement with mistakes and weaknesses (2/181; 3/15; 2/120; 1/146) and from reflection on current practices (2/142; 3/65; 2/120). A number of professionals spoke about specific attempts and interventions they were involved in to promote reflective learning, in order to deepen understanding of the root causes of problems, to build staff agency, and to get beyond 'development jargon' (2/44; 3/61). Others spoke about the need for far greater sharing of knowledge and insights, in order to promote learning, as it emerged that there is very little opportunity to share learning between organisations or sectors (2/5; 2/136; 2/195), or even between projects or donors operating in the same district (1/188; 3/8). The importance of word of mouth (rather than written documents) was highlighted when sharing learning, given reading has been historically associated with men of so-called upper castes and is still not a dominant mode of communication (1/27). Many saw a need for dialogue, focusing on discussion as a process over time, and the importance of influencing and of being influenced (1/57; 1/37; 1/86). The significance of who is doing the talking (and listening) was noted, as some people and organisations are viewed as more 'neutral', and would therefore be listened to more than others (1/59). Platforms for exchange and learning were considered important on a one-to-one basis (3/3), as well as far wider networks of peers (3/11), such as that offered by the Female Foresters Network. Part of the exchange is also about far more than knowledge, but about building people's capacity and confidence in working with that knowledge, and in this regard, mentorship of all professionals, irrespective of how senior they are was deemed to be important (3/44).

As learning institutions, universities and academics have an ambiguous place in the promotion of knowledge and understanding in Nepal's community forestry. Whilst some organisations employ academics to undertake critical reviews of projects or programmes (1/169; 1/127), others said their organisations 'don't like research' (1/148) and that government policy relates to patriarchy and patronage rather than research (1/169). Some professionals bemoaned the limited time they had to engage in research thus they valued the work of visiting Master's students (1/178); however, others be rated academics, particularly international, for not understanding or engaging well enough with their audiences (1/59), and for being '20 years behind on gender', arguing that 'development happens without reading that stuff!' (1/113). Whilst some professionals felt practitioners and academics could be brought closer by academics 'doing development, not just studying it' (1/114), others were inspired by their conversations with particular academics (1/141). One professional proposed that greater learning could be had by academics writing journal articles in ways that practitioners can understand and learn from, and that ultimately practitioners and researchers should be working together (3/43).

The longing for learning amongst many of Nepal's forestry professionals reflects a desire to do community forestry differently, and to resist dominant knowledge practices that shut down opportunities to recognise and tackle inequalities and injustices. Current opportunities for learning and knowledge exchange were considered inadequate, with that between (I)NGOs and donors being haphazard, time limited and self-serving; that involving Nepali government and universities to be under-resourced; and that from indigenous research organisations to be good and where critical questions are being asked, but to be limited in scale (2/123). Consequently, there is seen to be a disconnect between local, national and global agendas for forestry in Nepal, with policy always lagging behind local realities and processes of change, and unable to capture the diversity on the ground (2/120). The need to bring in the realities, lived experiences, desires and voices of those on the ground was keenly felt by many professionals, although ensuring the authenticity of that was raised as a real challenge (2/120). Interventions could be improved by far greater learning from mistakes and weaknesses, with a focus on adaptation and iteration through reflective learning (2/123); however, respondents

spoke of the 'declining space for critical learning and practice' and asked 'how to revitalise this space?'(2/126). One senior professional directly spoke of the need to resist dominant knowledge practices by engaging in reflective learning and of promoting that through strategic collaboration in order to build bridges, but also of the need to properly resource that in terms of money and time (2/126). The professionals' perspectives presented here support the findings of a recent report for the World Bank, that in Nepal's community forestry there is a lack of expertise in gender and social inclusion at all levels, that organisational cultures reflect gender biases, and that there is limited space to discuss issues of inclusion (WOCAN, 2017). This paper also demonstrates however a great enthusiasm within the professional community to resist the status quo and to do things differently—to engage with and learn from complexity and nuance. In order for that to happen however funders and donors must listen to and support Nepali's forestry professionals in order to deliver more reflective knowledge practices.

Conclusions

This paper explored the tension in Nepal's community forestry professionals' 'knowledge practices', between knowledge (i.e., recognition of injustice) and working with that knowledge (i.e., challenging ideologies and apparatus), a tension that it is argued is due to the inherently political nature of working with knowledge. The paper offered a framework for understanding the plurality of knowledges that exist within Nepal's community forestry professionals, issues of control in how those knowledges are practiced, and opportunities for resisting that control in the pursuit of social justice. The focus on forestry professionals, rather than forest users, was significant, as whilst much work has sought to unpack the 'black box' of communities in community-based natural resource management (Blaikie, 2006), the same attention has not been afforded to professionals managing those processes.

Reviewing forty years of gender research and environmental policy, Arora-Jonsson (2014: 305) argues that the most important thing in tackling on-going contradictions and injustices is 'more research on knowledge producers, practitioners and policy makers—to understand how we work and our own preconceptions'. Echoing this, an Oxfam employee reflecting on his experience at the 2018 UN Commission on the Status of Women meeting, writes that '[w]hat ultimately matters in achieving deep-rooted change is for institutions and individuals to alter their ways of working and seeing the world' (Morchain, 2018). This paper responds directly to these calls, notably by both academics and practitioners, by exploring knowledge practices in Nepal's community forestry, exposing how they think and see the world, but also how potentially constructive ways of working with their knowledge are being shut down. Whilst this paper demonstrates that there is a great plurality of knowledge and recognition of injustices amongst Nepal's forestry professionals, there is also a politics to the ways in which they are able to 'work with'. that is, to practice their knowledge (cf. Hakkarainen, 2009). Plurality emerges from unique positionalities and personal experiences (which although ambivalent do point to the importance of space and relationality in creating understanding), and politics from the demand for quantifiable, short-term project outputs (attributed to funders and donors). In order to 'push back' (Eyben, 2015) against the patriarchal ideologies and governance apparatus that currently close down inclusive forest futures (Bhattari, 2017), this paper articulates how professionals are demanding a greater focus on learning—from the lived realities of forest users, from each other as practitioners, from qualitative engagements with complexity and processes of change, from so-called mistakes and weaknesses, and ultimately from greater reflexivity. Through such learning and reflection comes the opportunity to recognise injustices—within both forest user communities and forest institutions—and to begin to work to resist them, through a 'slow revolution' (Davids et al., 2014).

It has been argued that 'often the best and most useful expertise is also the most negotiated, reflexive, and humble. These are hugely valuable qualities in people and professionals involved with environment and development, and especially so in an era where sustainability needs plural, politicised transformations. Gender expertise that is self-aware about its troubles could actually be part of the politics of hope that the world now needs' (Leach, 2020: xxv). The community forestry professionals whose stories appear in and inspired this paper, offer examples of such self-awareness, humility and reflexivity; thus they are a part of the 'politics of hope' that Nepal's community forestry requires. Bhattari (2017) argues that the future of inclusive community forestry in Nepal depends on professionals 'who can recognise subtle patriarchal roots of gender injustice'; this paper fully supports that argument and calls for greater scholarly engagement with the plurality of practices, positionalities and professionals involved in community forestry. It urges scholars to go beyond 'black boxing' (cf. Blaikie, 2006) and critique alone, and instead to offer solidarity and support in promoting knowledge practices that recognise and resist injustices and thus help build socially just forest futures.

Note

[1] This definition is used across the articles in this special Issue on 'Beyond forestry: knowledge practices for sustainable landscapes with trees'.

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Competing Interests
The author has no competing interests to declare.

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