

District Forest Coordination Committee: A Prospective Multi-stakeholder Opportunity for Landscape Level Conservation and Development in Nepal

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Abstract: This paper scrutinize the strength, weakness, opportunity, and threat in the role of multi-stakeholder forums for Landscape Level Conservation and Development (LLCD) in Nepal, drawing on the experience of author, reviewed of study reports and SWOT analysis from three districts, in the Mid-Western and Far-Western Development Regions of Nepal. It argues that District Forest Coordination Committee has the prospective to ensure joint cooperation and coordination in the planning, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of Landscape Level Conservation and Development through transparency and trust building. Clear cut guidelines detailing roles, responsibilities and institutional set-up among the stakeholders and their effective enforcement are the keys to its success. This requires widening the scope of DFCC to encompass institutions working for various land uses that extends beyond district boundary at the landscape level for better coordination, communication and action.

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1. Introduction

Landscape Level Conservation and Development (LLCD) has proliferated discourses, policies and programs since past decades. It has emerged as an approach to biodiversity conservation and sustainable livelihoods across the landscape. LLCD is a comprehensive approach that aims to conserve forests, grassland, agricultural land, soil, water, biological diversity in the protected areas system and adjoining areas while considering the basic needs of people for their livelihoods. It facilitates the integrated planning and action among major stakeholders including government bodies, international/ national non-governmental organizations, community-based organizations and community people. National period plan and biodiversity strategy in Nepal have emphasized on landscape approach to biodiversity conservation and poverty alleviation (HMGN, 2002; Sanderson et al, 2002).

In this context, a multi-stakeholder coordination and decision-making platform, called District Forest Coordination Committee (DFCC), was envisioned by the Ministry of Forest and Soil Conservation (MFSC) to strengthen collaboration among a wide range of forestry stakeholders at district level (MFSC 2005). To make landscape level conservation and development happen, a strong network amongst the respective stakeholders is essential to discuss the underlying issues, make

decision and enforce effectively for integrated planning and management of biodiversity resources. The experience has also shown that the government is shifting to work in partnership from the conventional approach of working in isolation (Schoubroeck and Karna, 2003). Western Terai¹ Landscape Complex Project (WTLCP), since its inception, has been working with District Forest Coordination Committee (DFCC) as a multi-stakeholder coordination body in all three districts, such as Bardia, Kailali and Kanchanpur (WTLCP, 2008).

1.1 Landscape Level Conservation and Development

Landscape is the spatially heterogeneous areas that spread across a few kilometers across. It is a mosaic of habitats across which living beings complete their life cycle. A landscape allows a population of living beings an access to a larger area of habitat for seasonal migration permitting genetic exchange with other populations revealing the interconnectedness of populations (Sanderson et al., 2002). It supports various ecological services, like biodiversity conservation, eco-tourism, hydrological cycle, and

¹ The Terai belt is a flat and valuable stretch of fertile agricultural land in southern Nepal, which forms part of the alluvial Gangetic plain. It lies at an altitude of between 60-300m between the Indian border and the first, outer foothills (HMGN, 2002).

carbon oxygen cycle. Landscape connectivity is maintained through natural or anthropogenic corridors. The corridor, if not well maintained may limit the free movement of living beings.

LLCD requires a multidisciplinary conservation and development approach that demands an integrated plan and its effective enforcement for conserving and using biodiversity resources on a sustainable basis in various interwoven land use system for ecological, social, cultural and economic sustainability. Such a conservation approach must integrate different land uses such as protected areas, forests, rivers, watershed areas, agricultural land, private land, grass land, urban areas, settlement and other infrastructures, to name few. LLCD considers the complex and diverse needs of wildlife and people in the heterogeneous and dynamic ecosystem. The key to LLCD is defining the kind of heterogeneity that directly affects the parts of the nature under threat. Some focus on ecological heterogeneity such as climate, vegetation. Another important concern is defining biologically relevant landscape elements for effective conservation planning and development at the appropriate scales. Several conservation and development approaches are applied at different scales from global visions to small protected area planning. Some define patterns of biodiversity over the landscape with the goal of conserving the most species rich places and landscape species (Sanderson et al., 2002).

Nepal entered into the modern era of conservation with the enactment of National Parks and Wildlife Conservation Act in 1973. In three decades, a network of 19 Protected Areas (PAs), including 11 declared buffer zones, covering more than 20 percent of the country's land mass was established. It was strongly backed up by the evidences that parks and reserves can effectively protect some elements of biodiversity and contribute to conservation of nature. However, this approach has posed serious concerns in integrated development of conservation and livelihoods. Park-people conflict increased due to increased number of wildlife within PAs. The PAs confined within a certain territory impeded in maintaining the viable population of key wildlife species. There is limited possibility of creating more PAs to expand the conservation (GoN, 2010).

Based on the studies carried out by various researchers, particularly in the lowland Terai of Nepal; it has been found that none of the protected area, is capable of sustaining a viable population of mega fauna, such as the tiger, rhino and elephant, on their own. Additionally, not all the ecosystems, flora and fauna of Nepal are represented in the existing protected area

system. Because of the ever increasing population, poverty and local communities' dependency on forest resources for subsistence, the forests outside the protected areas are degraded and fragmented. Because of this rampant deforestation outside protected areas and the prevailing uncontrolled poaching incidences, the survival of many migratory animals has emerged as a big question mark. Given this backdrop landscape approach to conservation, a new conservation modality, which can address the basic needs of local people and restore and maintain biodiversity in protected as well as productive land, has evolved (Sigdel, 2007).

Thus, the PAs are embedded in a landscape where takes place the exploitation of multiple types of natural. LLCD in Nepal envisions linking the PAs and adjoining forests and other compatible land uses through the biological corridors to facilitate wildlife movement and dispersal for their long-term survival (HMGN, 2006). In its support, the Tenth Plan (HMGN, 2003) included LLCD as a priority program. Likewise, Forestry Sector Policy (HMGN, 2000) and Nepal Biodiversity Strategy (HMGN, 2002) identified landscape level planning as an approach to protecting and managing biodiversity on a sustainable basis.

Guided by these policies, Terai Arc Landscape (TAL) strategy (HMGN 2004) considers the dispersal of tiger, a flagship species, as the scientific basis for the identification of the landscape. TAL is a trans-boundary landscape between Nepal and India that extends across 11 protected areas, 4 in Nepal and 7 in India. TAL-Nepal extending over an area of 49,500 sq km from Bagmati River of Nepal in the east to Yamuna River of India in the west. It is considered as a 'biodiversity hotspot' and comprises two of WWF's Global 2000 eco-regions viz. *Terai-Duar Savannas and Grasslands* eco-region and the *Himalayan Subtropical Broadleaf Forests* eco-region (HMGN, 2006). Guided by the 10th five year plan of the government of Nepal with financial and technical support from UNDP, GEF, UNDP, SNV, Bioversity International, NARC and LiBIRD has implemented Western Terai Landscape Complex Project (WTLCP) in three Terai districts of the Far and Mid Western Development Region of Nepal since August, 2005. WTLCP adopts the approach of conserving the flagship species, and integrating biodiversity conservation and development criteria in the various land use systems for effective conservation planning and development to ensure a long term survival of biodiversity resources (WTLCP, 2005).

1.2 Emergence of District Forest Coordination Committee as Multi stakeholder forum

The concept of sectoral coordination platform within the forestry sector ranges from the project-level coordination mechanisms to a formal sector-wide DFCC at the district level. In 2002, the attention of some donors and INGOs were drawn by a group of forest officials at MFSC towards supporting the collaborative coordination and management approach, mainly for the Terai. According to the revised Forestry Policy 2000, the specific objectives of the DFCC are a) management of the district forest area in coordination with the stakeholders and formulation of a district plan for the conservation and management of forest resources through partnership and participation, and b) coordination and monitoring of the implementation of programs including support to activities for poverty reduction and gender equality. In order to achieve these objectives, the government prepared a DFCC Establishment and Operational Guidelines 2005 that defines the framework and processes for multi-stakeholder participation. A key aspect of this is that DFCC is a structure not within the MFSC, but within the district level local government body called District Development Committee (DDC), which has been authorized to form a DFCC in each district with a maximum of twenty seven representatives from different stakeholder groups (MFSC 2005). The Guidelines further specify the DFCC structure, functions, fund allocation and mobilization, and monitoring of programs. Overall, the regulation designates DFCC as a facilitator and coordinator for the conservation, management and sustainable utilization of forest resources in the district. The government of Nepal has promulgated Local Self-Governance Act (HMGN, 1999) to decentralize decision making over land and natural resource management from central to district levels. This policy initiative has authorized District Development Committees (DDCs) to manage conservation and sustainable development efforts, drawing upon the technical expertise and support of the district line agencies to work in partnership with community groups and NGOs. This act provides the legal framework to form DFCC to ensure joint collaboration and coordination in the planning, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of the forestry sector activities at district and community levels through transparency and trust building ways.

In order to achieve the goal and objectives of the DFCC, the directive makes provision for multi-stakeholder participation in its structure. According to the directive, the District Development Committee (DDC, the local government at district level) can form a DFCC in each district with a maximum of twenty-seven representatives from different stakeholder groups (MFSC 2005). (Rana et.al., 2009). There are some

experiences on how DFCCs demonstrated their capability in forestry sector's planning and budgeting (Schoubroeck and Karna, 2003). Khanal and Pokharel (2007) have analyzed the stakeholder composition of DFCC as per provision of the DFCC guideline. The largest proportion of representation on the DFCC is 30 percent from government line agencies including District Forest Office (DFO), followed by 22 percent from local government (DDC, Municipality and VDC associations), 29 percent from civil society (NGOs, Community Based Organizations and user groups), 15 percent from political parties (nationally recognized political parties at district level), and 4 percent from the private sector (business federations and forest based industries). The DFCC is being supported as a multi-stakeholder forum, which is seen by policy makers as an instrument for good forest governance.

To expedite the process of landscape level conservation at various mosaics of land use system, WTLCP has supported to replicate DFCC from central Terai² of Nepal to its project districts such as Bardia, Kailali and Kanchanpur. DFCC is a multi stakeholder's network that comprises 27 members, including district development committee, district based political parties, civil societies, environment related NGOs, local authority, and government line agencies, private sectors, and women. District Development Committee Chairperson chairs the DFCC, while District Forest Officer acts as a member secretary.

2. Methodology

To generate evidence for this paper, an appreciative inquiry approach was followed with an aim to promote positive learning in the forestry reform process. The citizen voices referred to in this text mostly include the voices of leaders of political parties, local civil society, NGOs and forest users' federations. The paper draws information from the following three different, but related sources.

Review of study reports: Various papers about forestry and governance were reviewed to conceptualize learning from DFCC in relation to deliberative governance perspectives. Previous study reports related to the multi-stakeholder processes particularly DFCC processes in Kailali Kanchanpur and Bardia districts were also reviewed to get a picture of the processes adopted, outputs delivered and outcomes achieved by DFCC. These districts fall under WTLCP areas, where the DFCCs have been supported at least for four years

Experiences of the authors: The author, through their professional affiliations to WTLCP, two years of direct working experience with the DFCCs. The authors were not just passive observers but active facilitators and promoters of DFCC. This experience has helped authors to gain deeper insights into the working of the DFCCs in various districts they worked. Furthermore, the findings of the field experience were discussed with some key professionals involved in promoting the DFCCs at both district and national levels.

SWOT Analyses of DFCC: There could be various ways an institutional analysis is undertaken. For example, Bampton (2003) adopts Röling's (2002) framework for conditions that influence the effectiveness of multi-stakeholder platforms is used to analyze DFCCs for the forest sector in the Nepali Terai. For the purpose of this paper, strength, weakness, opportunity and threats of the DFCC for conserving biodiversity resources at landscape level are analyzed.

3. Result

3.1 Strength

DFCC is a legitimate body at the district level to coordinate with the stakeholders, which is guided by the government policies and legislations. It has represented major stakeholders in the district including government line agencies, political parties and civil society organizations. Being a multi stakeholder network representing authority of the various interwoven land use systems, WTLCP has utilized the forum for planning, monitoring and reviewing its annual activities since the very beginning of its implementation stage i.e. since August 2005. DFCC is closely linked to stakeholders from the community to central level, as deemed by WTLCP. In addition to DFCC, WTLCP has supported to form the Landscape Coordination Committee (LCC)³ to discuss and resolve the landscape level issues passed on by DFCC.

DFCC has the mandate to formulate and approve the district level forestry sector strategic and operational plans. In 2007, WTLCP supported DFCC in Kailali and Kanchanpur to prepare District Forestry Sector Plan with a common vision and understanding for managing forest resources in the district. This plan has played an important role in preparing plans by District Forest Office (DFO) and WTLCP. Likewise, WTLCP supported to prepare a landscape level eco-tourism plan in consultation with the DFCC members.

³ LCC representing both mid and far-western regional forest directorates. The senior most Regional Director of Forest chairs LCC (WTLCP, 2005).

Each year, DFCC reviews the annual work plan prepared at the community level for WTLCP support and endorses the plan to LCC for its review. LCC then endorses to WTLCP Project Executive Board (PEB), which finally approves the annual plan. DFCC in Kailali has formed the monitoring committee to undertake joint monitoring of forestry sector activities. WTLCP has supported the committee to monitoring activities in its project area. The monitoring committee shares its observations to other DFCC members. This way, DFCC is involved in the planning, implementation and monitoring processes and has developed ownership of LLCD results.

The committees, in addition to guiding WTLCP, discuss and decide various forest management issues in DFCC meetings. DFCCs have held a number of meetings since their inception, in active participation of their members and representatives of invited stakeholders. The DFCC meetings have represented disadvantaged groups such as women, Dalits and Janajatis. For example, DFCC Kailali was formed for the first time on 20 December 2005. Reviewing the records maintained by DFCC, it was revealed that until December 2009, a total of 13 meetings were held in Kailali and made altogether 33 decisions. Out of the total decisions, 11 were related to WTLCP activity. The WTLCP decisions include progress review, planning, and monitoring of the project activities. Likewise, 10 decisions were related to reviewing DFCC guidelines and holding regular meetings of DFCC. Similarly, other decisions include discouraging forest encroachment, reviewing progress of District Forest Office, handing over community forests and conserving Chure area. In an average, each meeting was attended by 34 members, including invitees. Of which, 13% were female. Likewise, representation from Dalit, local and others were 9%, 6% and 85% respectively. DFCC pays meeting allowance to the participants following the government rule. This has helped to institutionalize the functions of DFCC.

Regular DFCC meetings help raising awareness amongst the stakeholders about the higher conservation value of biodiversity resources and importance of landscape approach to conservation and development. Various decisions in favor of protecting corridors and connectivity have been made. DFCC supported District Forest Office for effective law enforcement. As often community representatives participate DFCC meeting as invitee, there remains a chance of close interaction between DFCC members and community people. Because of this, a functional linkage between government line agencies and local communities has gradually been established. With this

linkage, local communities have increased access to some development works from DFCC member organization like DDC, District Soil Conservation Office, District Forest Office and District Livestock Service Offices as complementary program to WTLCP supported conservation activities by directly approaching to the government line agencies. Thus, the operation of DFCC has increased coordination and collaboration among the stakeholders at the district that have direct implications to LLCD.

3.2 Weakness

Despite having immense importance of the platform for coordination, the DFCC has some shortfalls too. First, it does not fairly represent all the sectors of a society, like women, dalit and local communities. The DFCC guideline stipulates to represent at least one woman member. With the changed socio-political context, 50% seats for women members in public fora has been a growing concern. Thus, the guideline needs review to represent 50% women members. Similarly, number of membership from Dalits and Janajatis need to be specified. Second, according to the given DFCC Guidelines, the DFCC should be led by the elected district development committee chairperson, which has been in vacuum due to non-availability of elected bodies at District Development Committee, Village Development Committees and municipalities. In this context, Local Development Officer (LDO) has chaired the committee. By nature of the position, LDO is a government employ with government specified roles and responsibilities. The position is transferred from one district to another at certain time interval and also with the change in the government structure. This could certainly limit their vision, action and ownership to leading the district in terms of raising and resolving various issues. Thus, it is urgently required to stabilise the local government by holding consensus among the political parties in and outside the government.

Third, different role of the organization with respect to Forestry and Environmental Development Committee (FEDC) under District Development Committee, which is envisioned by the Self Governance Act, 1996 is not rationalized clearly. FEDC is primarily involved in the annual planning process under DDC and District Council. Accordingly, FEDC meetings are held in which the forestry sector government line agencies review the progress of a fiscal year and plan for next fiscal year. The government line agencies include District Forest Office (DFO), District Soil Conservation Office (DSCO), District Plant Resource Office (DPRO), District Agriculture Office, District Livestock Service Office and government managed projects such as TAL and

WTLCP. Most members in FEDC and DFCC are same. In addition, FEDC is also chaired by DDC Chairperson and it has broader scope than the forestry sector committee. DDC Planning process begins from VDC level and then goes to regional level. Finally, before forwarding it to the DDC Council, FEDC discuss thoroughly, mainly agricultural, forestry, and livestock sector plans.

However, there is no functional linkage between FEDC and DFCC. Besides, there could be other committees as well such as defined by the Nepal Biodiversity Strategy, 2002 District Biodiversity Coordination Committees are to be constituted in each district to look after biodiversity related activities at district level. But, all these committees have not well considered the roles of International/Non-governmental Organizations and bilateral programs/ projects in forestry sector. There is no clear coordination and communication on who is doing what. Thus, it is required to review the membership, function, roles and responsibilities of members of all such environment related committees and develop guidelines authorizing one committee that is fully responsible for all issues related to landscape level conservation at district level.

Similarly, role and responsibilities of DFCC members are not defined explicitly. Moreover, the representatives assigned to participate the DFCC meeting from different political parties are not fixed. Even, it seems that there is no culture of sharing DFCC meeting outcomes by the meeting participants, especially political party representatives with their respective organizations. Most of the time, new representatives come from political party and makes uneasy to smooth running of meetings. Moreover, the DFCC Guidelines formulated during King's regime recognize only four political parties as member of the DFCC. However, in the current changing political context and reconciliation culture; it is felt necessary to include all the district based political parties in the DFCC.

Moreover, the Landscape Approach to conservation demands intervention beyond district boundary, including buffer zone and protected areas, therefore at least their representation in DFCC should be made mandatory, which is lacking in the present structure. Likewise, it is felt necessary to represent all community groups, in which the landscape level conservation activities are to be implemented. And, their linkage with the DFCC should be very strong. In the same way, DFCC meeting discuss at length about the ownership of the organization, who owns either DFO or DDC? It sometimes gives the impression that DFCC simply acts as a project formed coordination

committee or a committee formed and operated to ease the coordination and communication of a project. It is evident from the number of meetings held to review the progress and endorse the annual plan of the project. DFCC calls a meeting whenever a project supports it for its purpose. Thus, for the institutional development and sustainability of such multi-stakeholder forum, DFCC needs to set-up its plans and programs with the support from different stakeholders. Accordingly, the meetings be held and decisions taken, plan for next meeting. On the whole, it seems that the DFCC has been driven solely by the WTLCP thus far. The DFCC body has a scope of working only with the Forestry Sector, while the landscape level conservation demands beyond forestry sector, including protected areas, buffer zone, agriculture land, and livestock. In addition, the role of the DFCC is not specified, like is this a decision making body? Or advisory body? Or Monitoring and coordinating body? The DFCC could be sustained more effectively if it could be brought under the umbrella of local government with required improvements (such as provision of a local sustainable fund mechanism, and greater representation of disadvantaged communities)

3.3 Opportunity

Based on the four years experiences with the DFCC, this kind of multi stakeholder coordination body in a district level helps to make the program transparent and makes DFCC members more responsible to biodiversity conservation and community development. Holding regular meetings and sharing program progress and difficulties, supports to win heart and mind of the various stakeholders and makes easy for activities implementation process. The forum in addition to approving the project activities, spends considerable time for discussing on the various forest management issues of the district, like encroachment for settlement and agricultural land expansion, over grazing and illegal logging.

Government realizing the important role of DFCC to control encroachment, recently made DFOs mandatory for mobilizing DFCC members in encroachment minimization. The DFCC has other importance; like it helps raising awareness level of political party and other district based stakeholders. Likewise, it eases generating matching fund for community proposed development activities. Similarly, policy makers can get policy feedback from this meso level institution, which has linkage with ground level institutions. Realizing need of a joint monitoring committee under the DFCC, the Ministry of Forests and Soil Conservation recently formulated working guidelines for District Forestry Sector Monitoring Committee (DFSMC) working guidelines. As per the

guidelines DFMC has already been formed in Kailali and Kanchanpur. The DFMC represents District Administrative office, District Forest Office; district based political parties, journalists, private sectors and civil society.

Being a platform for designing forestry sector plan, the DFCC provides an opportunity of sharing intra sectoral activities and thereby reducing the problem of duplication and gaps. As community representatives are called for presenting their progress by themselves, a linkage between the community people and the line agencies and local authority has been strengthened. It has been observed that, during the project planning process, the community has invited DDC Officials as facilitators as well as guests. This has helped to access infrastructure development activities from DDC as matching fund to the conservation fund supported from the project.

There are other opportunities for capacity building and institutionalizing DFCC. For example, WTLCP has organized various activities, like study tour, observation tour, interaction meetings, natural resources governance training, capacity enhancement workshops to strengthen DFCC capacity. With this, support, each DFCC has developed a plan of action for 2009. At the initial stage, the WTLCP had to spend considerable time and effort for holding DFCC meetings. However, now, the government has realized the higher importance of the forum for discussing various forest management issues and hence the responsibilities of making vibrant DFCC have been bestowed with the District Forest Officer. Now onwards, the role of the project for activating the DFCC has gradually been replaced by the DFO. This will strengthen DFCC towards institutional development.

3.4 Threats

Although DFCC has well represented major stakeholders in the district, some government line agencies feel that they are not represented in the DFCC. For example, park office, buffer zone and all the district level political parties. It is therefore important to review the composition of DFCCs to represent (in) formal institutions and communities who holds stake in the biodiversity sector. Organizing participatory workshops to identify and review the role of stakeholders would help address this issue. Organizing the informal institutions and communities into a formal group would help raise their common voice and issues to represent in the DFCC.

In the absence of clear role and responsibilities of the DFCC members, working with

such a big platform, mainly for getting approval in the Annual Work Plan of WTLCP is very tricky. They often put pressure to the project in favor of their interest at the cost of their signature. Being, diverse stakeholders', finding a common point of interest is very difficult. Most of the stakeholders eye on the budget and try to pull it for their area of interest, in terms of amount, place and activity because of this it makes difficult to achieve the goal of biodiversity conservation following landscape approach to conservation. Showing impact in biodiversity sectors takes time, big investment and delays in producing impact, makes impatient for the poor peoples representatives and show disappointment with the biodiversity project. Technical decision may get less priority compared to the political decisions. Being a big platform, it is very difficult to get timely decision too.

Linking DFCC to various central and village level forums has been a paramount concern. In this regard, the DFCC should be linked VDC level coordination committee, which needs to be formed at the local level and at the central level; the district level committee should be linked with Biodiversity Coordination Committee under the Ministry of Forest and Soil Conservation. As the scope of the committee is limited to forestry sector, it is wise to replace the institution gradually by District Biodiversity Coordination Committee. Likewise a policy intervention for establishing Village Biodiversity Coordination Committee is necessary and its linkage with the DFCC needs to be established. As the platform is big enough and influences more by the political motives, it is wise to form a small technical management committee at District level and from that committee the project should discharge its activities

4. Conclusion

DFCC has the prospective to ensure joint collaboration and coordination in the planning, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of Landscape Level Conservation and Development through transparency and trust building. It has represented wide range of stakeholders from the district. The members have actively participated in planning and decision making processes to address the issues in the forestry sector.

Clear cut guidelines detail roles, responsibilities and institutional set-up among the stakeholders and effective enforcement are the keys to its success. This requires widening the scope of DFCC to encompass institutions working for various land uses at the landscape level for better coordination, communication and action. Thus, it is urgently required to stabilize the local government by holding consensus

among the political parties in and outside the government.

To make the DFCC work more effective and efficient, it is essential to strengthen management and decision making capacity of the meso level institution. The role of the DFCC with respect to other district based organizations should be rationalized. Likewise, to run the daily activities smoothly, it is imperative to establish a secretariat. In addition, the scope of the coordination body needs to be broadened. Similarly, this kind of institutions at VDC level needs to be envisioned and a vertical linkage needs to be established and strengthened. In a short term, the existing policy and programs needs to be reviewed and a clear cut suggestions for landscape planning organization needs to be recommended. As soon as possible, a single body needs to be promoted in entire environmental sectors. These improvements could lead DFCC to function as a multi-stakeholder forum for LLCD in Nepal.

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