NGOs as Facilitating Agents in Community Works under a Genuine Participatory Approach

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The governments of many developing countries have set themselves over-optimistic targets as regards the provision and maintenance of basic infrastructure and services for their people. This has led them (and the donor community and aid agencies) to involve beneficiary communities in the identification and implementation of programs and projects and in the subsequent management, operation and maintenance of the assets created. The introduction of community participation has certainly improved the chances of sustainability but my feeling is that many of the resulting joint ventures are rather unsatisfactory compromises between the very different interest of the parties involved:

- the politicians, whose main interests are in getting into power and then staying in power;
- the technical ministries/departments of central/local government, which have limited resources but are reluctant to relinquish any of their responsibilities;
- the donors and aid agencies, which want to see the best use made of their limited resources but dictate the nature and source of the aid they will provide; and, last of all;
- the people themselves, who usually know what they want but whose views are often ignored or over-ridden.

Not exactly a recipe for worldwide replication!

I should like to propose an alternative approach in which governments make a realistic reassessment of their roles in the provision and maintenance of basic infrastructure such that they adopt a more promotional, supportive and regulatory role as regards basic infrastructure which they are unable to provide but which communities, given adequate technical and financial assistance, may be able to provide for themselves as community works.

Community works are undertaken by groups of people with common interests in acquiring certain physical assets or services, usually with technical and financial assistance from facilitating agencies. The assets created should become the property of the groups of beneficiaries or communities involved who should be fully responsible for managing, maintaining and, where appropriate, operating them.

In other words, communities should be put into the driving seat, encouraged to identify their needs and priorities, and then be helped to acquire the assets they want. As a corollary, governments and aid agencies should adopt a more passive but responsive role and be prepared to work at the communities' pace. They must think in terms of their participation in communities' projects rather

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than the other way around. They should start to treat communities as clients and, in effect, help them to "buy" the assets they want, albeit at a subsidized price. Genuine community ownership should offer a far better chance of sustainability than community management.

From the supporting agencies point of view, the key issues are how much subsidy and what priority should communities projects receive. The answers will, of course, depend on:

- the resources available;
- the objectives and policies of the governments and donors;
- the socio-economic benefits of the projects;
- the communities' understanding of and commitment to their responsibilities as owners of the assets they want.

From the communities' point of view, the key issues are likely to be:

- what assets do we need most;
- how can we afford the initial cost; and
- will we be able to manage the assets once we have them.

This brings us to the question of how to support community works. In my view, this support should incorporate the use of NGOs as facilitating agencies for the following activities:

a) The establishment of community development funds which can accept money from government, donors, NGOs, etc and also from beneficiaries, and which has clear rules and procedures for the management and disbursement of the funds received.

b) Implementation by local resource-based methods (i.e. making maximum use of locally available materials, labor, skills and institutions).

c) Adequate technical assistance from facilitating agencies throughout the project cycle, including:
   - providing case officers to act as intermediaries between the fund and the communities;
   - helping with the formation and registration of associations of beneficiaries (where necessary);
   - helping with the acquisition of credit (preferably through commercial banks);
   - preparing alternative schemes and helping communities to choose between them;
   - helping communities to ensure that costs and benefits are fairly shared;
   - procuring materials, tools etc and organizing and supervising implementation, and training communities in management, operation and maintenance of the assets created (refer to Annex 1 for an example of topics for trainings).

d) The implementation of all projects to be costed in full (including labour and locally available materials) and the communities' contributions to be specified as percentages of the total costs. I personally prefer a credit-supported cash contribution and paid labour (with the benefici-
c) Equitable distributions of costs and benefits within communities, so that the poorest and most vulnerable members do actually benefit from the projects (e.g. by earning more than they have to contribute).

d) Limiting the involvement of central and local government to that which is absolutely necessary, i.e.:
   - statutory clearances (e.g. granting water rights);
   - technical and standardization clearances (e.g. hand pump specifications and standard designs); and
   - compatibility with local development plans (where they exist).

   There should be no need for proposals and requests to be submitted through local development committees. Any group of people should be at liberty to submit a proposal to the managers of the development fund and then obtain the necessary government clearances with the help of a facilitating agency, e.g. a local community-based NGO.

   These ideas concerning the provision and maintenance of community-level infrastructure, are based largely on my experience in Africa and Asia. They are certainly not appropriate everywhere. What do you think might work in Nepal?
Proposed Topics for NGO Training on Second Hill Irrigation Project Schemes

1. Formation and Management of Farmers' Irrigation Associations, viz:
   - Constitution,
   - By-laws,
   - Agreement with Department of Irrigation,
   - Administration and Financial Management, and
   - Procedures for Meetings, Elections, etc.

2. Operation and Maintenance of the Irrigation System, viz:
   - Water-share System,
   - Water Allocation and Management,
   - Minor Repairs by Community Based Working Groups ("petty contractors"),
   - Procedures for Major Repairs by Department of Irrigation,
   - Mobilising Local Resources (labour, skills, materials and finances) for operation, maintenance and repairs.

3. Environmental Protection of the Irrigation System, viz:
   - Slope Protection (livestock control/reforestation),
   - Landslide Stabilisation (bio-engineering),
   - Prevention of River Bank Erosion (bio-engineering),
   - Watershed Management,
   - Appropriate fodder, fruit and fuelwood trees/shrubs/grasses for protection works, and planting techniques.

4. Agronomic Improvement of Cultural Practices
   - Improved seeds,
   - Better access to credit and input supplies,
   - Local community savings groups,
   - Compost making
   - Improved land preparation, and
   - Farmer-to-farmer training (IIMI-model).
Figure 1: Traditional Construction Oriented Process
Figure 2: SPWP Participatory Process

Key
- Farmers' Representative
- MIT: Mobile Irrigation Team
- OV: Overseer (from the District Irrigation Office or Regional Directorate)
- Eng: Engineer (from the District Irrigation Office, MIT or Regional Directorate)
- AO: Association Organiser (from the District Irrigation Office or NGO)
- FIA: Farmer Irrigation Association
- WUMC: Water Users' Management Committee (of the FIA)
- NGO: Non-Government Organisation
- DFO: District Forest and Soil Conservation Office
- DADO: District Agricultural Development Office
- Future Technical Assistance requirements? Institute for Construction Management.