

NGOs in Irrigated Agriculture: A Review of Institutional Instruments

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Premise

NGOs² are most prominently observed in the irrigated agricultural sector of Nepal. Primarily an agricultural country, Nepal can take pride in the time-honored tradition of these NGOs. Various sources estimate that out of the presently irrigated agricultural area in the country, 60 to 80% is provided with irrigation service by these NGOs. The role of these NGOs are varied and involve meeting the basic food need of the population, managing scarce water resources, maintaining agri-environmental balance, and increasing the measure of sustainability, both in terms of local resources mobilization and agricultural productivity. For this work, NGOs should receive sincere recognition from all who have a stake in the development and modernization of the country.

Government Policy: Acts and Plans

This year HMG/N has already come out with three institutional instruments³ to provide recognition and support to NGOs in the irrigated agricultural sector. They are: Irrigation Policy (IP) 2049, Water Resources Act (WRA) 2049, and Eighth Five Year Plan (2049/2054).

One of the objectives of IP is to "strengthen and widen the Nepali farmers autonomous irrigation management tradition in the private sector." The IP intends to limit the government role in the areas of sectoral policy review and development, resource mobilization, economic analysis and technology promotion by maximizing the participation of the private sector and NGOs in program implementation. The IP classifies irrigation development program into four categories : i) jointly managed by agency and farmer organization, ii) farmer-owned and managed irrigation systems, iii) agency turned over irrigation systems to farmer-owned and managed irrigation systems, and iv) individually managed irrigation systems (covering less than 10 ha.in the hills and 25 ha.in the tarai). The IP states that NGOs can run program in the fourth category. But at the same time it also states that this provision does not bar NGOs to do projects beyond the scope of this category.

The WRA for the first time in the legal history of Nepal recognizes water user organizations (WUO) as the autonomous corporate entity with a right to perpetual succession. The WRA also enables the government to transfer government-administered irrigation systems to farmer-ownership and management. It also provides for a provision whereby government can enter into contract with organizations to develop,utilize and extend the water resources services.

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In the Eighth Plan,⁴) the following measures have been adopted to bring about NGOs participation into the development process of the country :

- Administrative procedures be simplified and streamlined to protect NGOs efforts and prevent obstacles
- "One Window" system adopted to make government decision-making system efficient
- Clear and defined NGOs policy will be formed and implemented. This includes arrangement of liberal laws and regulation, decentralization of power, simplification of association registration procedures, more autonomy to association and creation of an environment to make them more accountable etc.
- INGOs will be encouraged to work through Nepali NGOs
- NGOs will be motivated to be supportive and supplementary to the local agencies. They are also encouraged to orient themselves towards creative and new activities of public importance.
- Information, data and communication system on NGOs would be appropriately established.

In the irrigated agricultural sector, the Eighth Plan also speaks of a management fee that the public irrigation agencies would provide to the NGOs for their irrigation management works.

Another relevant document for NGOs in the irrigated agricultural sector is the policy report 4) prepared by a task force for the Ministry of Social Welfare and Labour/HMG. In a section titled "Policy to be adopted by HMG on national and international NGOs", the following "principles" among others are stated:

- a) Enable NGOs to fulfill a role supplementary to the government in the development process
- b) Provide autonomy to NGOs in its task of fulfilling their objectives
- c) Prior approval of the Social Services National Co-ordination Council shall be required for NGOs assistance agreement with foreign agencies
- d) Tax, custom duties, sales tax exemption and visa requirements for expatriate consultants and volunteers would be done through SSNCC.

Gaps and Problem Identification

The government so far has been unable to differentiate between two broad but substantive categories of NGOs; that of the Professional NGOs as opposed to socio-economic NGOs. Professional NGOs are those who provide technical assistance to socio-economic NGOs who actually locally manage a task or group of tasks (like NGOs in the irrigated agricultural sector) on a day-to-day as well as long term sustainable basis. A socio-economic NGO may also provide professional services to fellow NGOs. This categorization is done not to inhibit development of NGOs from one form to another but to help form analytical categories so that present trend in NGO status and roles can be appropriately differentiated. Lack of clear differentiation between two types of NGOs has severely

limited proper understanding of Nepal's NGO tradition and recent entry of a segment of Nepal's educated work force into professional NGO market. Government SSNCC policies so far largely seem to center around these professional NGOs.

A paternalistic tendency is still evident in the government's policy and other operational instruments for NGOs promotion in the country. The government wants to make NGOs "more autonomous", "more accountable", "more efficient and supplementary to the government development efforts".

Government policy and other operational instruments voice the need for NGOs, but bureaucratic and political reorientation and matching reforms in the bureaucratic and political spheres is either very slow or irrelevant. The prolonged conflict of interests noted in the process of approving the new irrigation policy itself clearly reflects lack of consensus among the officials in the irrigation bureaucracy. Intense conflict has been noted among the irrigation bureaucratic subcultures for resources and strategic position in the irrigation bureaucracy. In a socio-political set-up where the government has been playing an omnipresent and omnipotent role, NGOs seem to have been recognized simply as a valuable appendage to the Government's development program. The situation has led to the establishment of a number of "mock" or "renegade" NGOs at the cost of those who have been working sincerely.

In sectors like that of irrigated agriculture, the tradition of farmer NGOs has been severely undercut by rampant government intervention in the form of various development projects. Government superimposed projects have been debasing local initiative and sustainable endeavors. Imminent evolution of participatory development program across the irrigation sector has yet to be fully comprehended by irrigation bureaucrats and political leaders who have been more conversant with the project approach. Until now, out of budget outlay of Rs. 2.05 billion for irrigation in fiscal year 1992/93, about 70% is allocated for conventional type of irrigation projects.

Restructuring irrigation bureaucracy to match with the participatory irrigation development program which helps promote NGOs would initially sharpen the gap between restructured/reorganized irrigation bureaucracy and some staff. Organizational instability would be caused by both strong and weak staff leadership. In both these cases, restructuring of the irrigation bureaucracy gets politicized.

Functions like use of water legislation for managerial purposes and for providing water resources management have been viewed as a foreign concept by irrigation bureaucracy. The new Water Resources Act declares that ownership of water resources found in the Kingdom of Nepal shall be vested in the Kingdom of Nepal and their use shall be made subject to the provisions of the Act. The Act also states that the concerned water user's organization will have ownership over the project once it is handed over to water user's organization. However, the differences between state ownership of water resources and water user's organization ownership of projects are not defined. In the document entitled "Handetar Irrigation System Turnover Agreement between WRID/DOI/HMGN and Irrigation User Organization", it is mentioned under Clause 1, Subclause 1.03 of the Agreement that despite the system turnover, the ownership of Handetar Irrigation System and land covered by it shall continue to remain under the ownership of DOI/HMGN.

The government's Eighth Plan and proposed NGO Policy includes NGOs within the framework of government decentralization. Conceptually and in principle, it is yet not understood that there is no central power location of NGOs. They different plural field interests, different various functions and are spread throughout the country.

Suggestions

The government should provide more development priority to the country's socio-economic NGOs. These NGOs should be the point for investment and be recognized as the sustainable base of local resource management. Professional NGOs should be rated against their promotional support to these NGOs.

The government should get rid of its paternalistic view of NGOs. Like the government or public sector, NGOs are a sector in themselves. The degree of NGOs autonomy, accountability, efficiency should be guided and decided by NGOs own organizational culture. NGOs themselves could decide the problem areas to work in.

NGOs requirements should not be government or donor driven. As a matter of fact, the government or donor should adjust themselves to the objectives of local national NGOs. Clout and influence of a government or a donor would be more positively utilized if the local NGOs are encouraged to apply their discriminatory power in selectively utilizing the resources available at government and donor level. For this purpose, government and donors should start to learn from their past blunders and go on to reorienting themselves by adopting a supportive role.

A time bound program should be formulated to cover the whole irrigated agricultural sector with participatory development program.

Instead of focusing on individual leadership in the irrigation bureaucracy, particular care should be taken to ensure that a restructured irrigation bureaucracy helps to keep in place a system of authoritative and accountable relationships so that an individual leadership's strength/weakness is not unduly allowed to politicize the organizational process. This could well create more instability and lack of direction in the organization.

An explanatory note should be prepared to educate NGOs and agency staff on the ownership issue. This should authoritatively differentiate "ownership of water resources" from "ownership of irrigation project or system" and give all implications of the ownership issue.

Government should be supportive of establishing a federation of NGOs in Nepal. This federation should replace SSNCC. The federation should promulgate all the operational rules and performance criteria required for NGOs.

References

In this paper, NGOs refer to those socio-economic organizations of farmers who have been working together for a considerable period of time to manage water resources to sustain irrigated agricultural system. Also refer to, Nepal : Partners of Irrigation, a film of video Department of Irrigation and World Bank, produced by Consolidated Management Services Ltd., June, 1992.

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