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## Irrigation in Bajhang: The Role of NGOs

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In the following pages, I will give some preliminary thoughts on the role of non governmental organizations (NGO) in irrigation management. Though they are only exploratory, I present them here so as to provoke a discussion and receive feedback in order to develop these thoughts further. I will begin by painting the historical and physical background to irrigation in Bajhang District. Farmer-managed irrigation systems (FMIS) are found throughout the District; these have a long history which has produced an institutional form in-tune with location-specific factors (labor, knowledge etc.) where the systems are found. This introductory section will be followed by a short case study of an irrigation system which will highlight the present problems. This will be followed by the section on the possible role NGOs can play in resolving the problems faced by irrigation projects. I will argue that NGOs have a genuine role to play in the motivation and mobilization of grass roots organizations, which may take responsibility for and operate government sponsored development projects. However, it is my belief that this micro-level action is not enough. I will argue that NGOs must also work at the macro-level to influence Government policy, to describe alternative development models and to change local government practices, so as to create a more conducive environment for the indigenous utilization of natural resources by the local communities.

### Irrigation in Bajhang

Bajhang District is remote by any standard - far from the national center, no motorable roads, poor population, poor agriculture. Yet throughout this District one comes across "kulos" (FMIS canals). What may be even more surprising is that the Government had no hand in their construction and do not have any hand in their operation or maintenance. For whatever historical reason most of the larger agricultural areas of the District are endowed with these "kulos" possessing histories stretching back over centuries. During the Rana regime, and probably since the beginning of feudal principalities, at the least, the governing authorities played a negligible role in the exploitation of natural resources. They may have had a heavy hand in commanding the local people to undertake certain activities, such as road maintenance, but they left the locals to their own devices when it came to the utilization of natural resources. The people were seen as sources of labour and taxes, not as recipients of the government largesse. In this environment the locals formed self-help institutions (definition: Institutions is a complex of norms and behaviours that persists over time by serving some socially valued purpose, while an organization is a structure of recognised and accepted roles - Uphoff 1986) mobilising sufficient human resources to effectively utilise natural resources such as water. These still persist to this day in the form of "kulalchays" (canal overseer) and the farmers' groups which look after their kulos.

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Although all the "kulos" are unique to a particular location, they all have broadly similar characteristics. For the sake of simplicity I will divide the kulos into two arbitrary categories based on their length from source to the head of the agricultural area. For each category I will describe the institutional characteristics which operate at the present. I am afraid my study was too limited for me to state categorically that these institutions have enabled the systems to be operated and maintained over time.

For the longer canals (anything over 1 km, the majority of kulos encountered were between 1 and 2 kms in length) Kulalchays are selected by the farmers from among themselves. There does not seem to be any sort of formal meeting, but a general consensus is arrived at over a few days just before the rice transplanting begins. The "kulalchay" is usually retained during the critical agricultural period from mid-June through to mid-September. He is responsible for bringing water to the "jiblow" (equivalent to a phant, a flattish land some metres above the river which is usually irrigated), and in some cases to ensuring its equitable distribution among all the fields (Note, not all systems give kulalchays responsibility for distributing the water). In order to ensure that the system can deliver the water when and where it is needed, he must continuously check the system. If there is a breach in the system, he will personally try to repair it - where possible, but otherwise, he will request help from the farmers nearest to the breach, and if this is insufficient he will notify the whole village. Though he does not have the authority to order the villagers to help in the repair works, he seems to be able to influence them due to some form of communal compact which ensures that the majority of the households do participate in the work.

At the time of his selection the farmers and the kulalchay will exchange written agreements which state the exact responsibility and authority of the kulalchay and the amount of grain that each farmer has to pay him for his task. Payment of this "mana-pathi" system can either be based on individual land holding on the jiblow, or fixed at a flat rate irrespective of land holding.

In the case of shorter canals - distance from source to agricultural area being less than 1 km - the whole community takes responsibility for operating and maintaining the system. Initially just before the peak labour demand period, all the farmers spend a day cleaning the canal, clearing it of any blockages, deepening it where necessary, reinforcing sections which may be weak, and generally ensuring that the canal can bring sufficient water to the whole jiblow. Since water is such a critical commodity for paddy rice cultivation if there are any breaches during the monsoon, repair work begins as soon as the breach is discovered, it does not need any coercion or motivation on part of the farmers.

### **A Short Case Study from Bajhang**

I will now present a short case study of an irrigation system, from which I hope to draw out lessons. The next section will deal with the possible role of NGOs in the irrigation field.

A days walk along the Seti River to the south-west of Chainpur, the District Headquarters of Bajhang, lies an area known as Thalara; an area of sharp relief dissected by tributaries of the Seti. Nestling in the folds between the rivers and ridges are some of the most productive agricultural lands in the District, among them is Pruchundi-Sayra Jiblow on the north side of the Thuli Gad. The soils of this area are meant to be red, but biannual deposits of compost has produced a layer of black soil. Due to three to four kulos the whole of this jiblow is irrigated, and has been for the past century. All, even the oldest inhabitant of the area at 87 said the kulos had been built before their grandfather's day.

Sometime in the mid-1980s some "pardeshis" (outsiders) came to survey the area. They told the locals that they were surveying the line of a proposed canal to the village on the other side of the ridge. A few years later other "pardeshis" appeared. This time they said they had come to build a "nahar" (the local people seem to differentiate between a "nahar" and "kulo" on three counts. If the canal is large, cemented-lined and provided by an external agency it is a "nahar"). The locals were even more surprised to hear that these outsiders were only going to line their main "kulo" with cement. But in order for this to occur the "pardeshis", who were the contractor, the engineer and overseer, informed the locals that they would have to form a water users association (WUA). At a small gathering - not all had heard about the meeting, the WUA was formed.

The "nahar" construction has now taken place, the "pardeshis" have left the area and water still flows through the system. But the lessons from this experience of Government development should not be forgotten, as it still occurs throughout Nepal. Asking a simple question such as, why the "kulo" was rehabilitated to a "nahar" when the supposed beneficiaries i.e those farmers with land on the "jiblow" had not even requested for a canal will be instructive.

To answer this question one has to look at the history of Second Hill Irrigation Project (SHIP) who re-built the system. The loan of US\$20 million for this Project was approved in November 1982 by the Asian Development Bank. However, surveys by consultants to locate 4,000 hectares targeted for irrigation by this Project came up short; only 2,000 ha could be found, for they discovered that the vast majority of areas which were suitable for irrigation already had some form of FMIS. However, this did not put off the ADB or HMG, who went ahead with the Project. The irrigation systems are a classic example of "donor-driven development", irrigation systems built not for the sake of the people in the area, but those in Kathmandu and Manila who process the loan, who can receive a Landcruiser, who can go on shopping trips to Bangkok and Hong Kong under the "overseas training" component and so forth. The first point is that development projects, more often than not, are for the sake of the bureaucrats and the donor agencies, rather than the declared beneficiaries.

The second point is that development projects lack accountability to the supposed beneficiaries. The Project was meant to benefit the farmers on Pruchundi-Sayra jiblow. But has anyone from SHIP, HMG or ADB, bothered to ask the people whether they are happy with their "nahar"? The people on the WUA mention that the canal has yet to be handed over to them. They strongly state that until they are satisfied with the work they will not sign any paper accepting the canal. They believe this will force the contractor to return to finish his task so as to get paid. However, when told that the contractor has already been paid for the work, they express surprise. How, they ask, can SHIP "ok" a canal without asking the WUA whether they are satisfied? The contractor, by whatever means, satisfied the engineer. It is the latter, and only his, signature that is needed for the contractor to receive his full payment. Where is the accountability there?

The third lesson is the lack of participation of the local people in the Project - the nominal beneficiaries. Not only did they not request the Project, but when it did become a reality, there was no mechanism for their meaningful participation. The contract was put out to tender in Kathmandu and the project headquarters in Dhangadi. Once the bid was won the contractor moved into the field with his own staff of qualified workers from the East. The Project pretends the people can participate through the WUA, which has to be established before work on the "nahar" can actually begin. This is mere tokenism. The engineer, overseer and contractor call a meeting where a number of people are nominated to become members. At that meeting they are told of their responsibilities - that's the extent of their "training" - and sign a paper stating they understand their responsibilities and those of the village. Theoretically they are meant to oversee that the contractor does not take any short cuts in the work, but without training, and no formal power or authority how are they supposed to ensure the contractor remains on the straight and narrow? Now three years after the completion of the "nahar"

if you ask people if there was such a thing as a WUA, most will claim they have never heard of one, and those "press-ganged" into the Association will tell you that they could not do anything. In any case, set few people attended the meeting that one cannot in any way say that the WUA formed represented the communities, hence participation was non-existent throughout the Project.

## **The Role of NGOs in Irrigation Management**

From the lessons highlighted above I will tentatively propose possible role for NGOs in the irrigation field. I strongly believe that the NGOs can become involved with irrigation at two levels - micro or field level and macro or policy level. I do not think NGOs should be constrained to work solely at one level, for though NGO projects are important, they do not by themselves provide solutions to problems on a national scale. But their field level experiences can give policy makers important insights about the effect of certain policies on rural communities and suggest alternatives. This could lead to the evolution of a more conducive macro-environment for development.

But before launching into the main thrust of this section I would like to add a caveat and here I can do no better than Micheal Cernea (1986) who warned, "...recognition of the key, growing, contribution that NGOs can and do make should not be accompanied by the mistake of idealising them," and went on to suggest that, "an objective approach to the limitations and weaknesses of NGOs is required for strengthening their own structures and performance, as well as for making their activities technically and economically sounder, and more replicable."

### **Motivation-Mobilization**

NGOs, through motivation and mobilization activities, can help in the formation of grass roots organisation. NGOs are ideally suited to the motivational-mobilization role for a number of reasons:

- a) they are not "tainted" in the minds of the rural people as are Government bureaucrats who are usually thought of as corrupt, high-handed, and having no real understanding or feeling for the rural people,
- b) they are usually innovative and not as "objective-bound" as the Government bureaucracy, who have their targets to meet. This is not to say that NGOs are completely unfettered to do as they wish,
- c) NGO workers are generally more understanding and interested in involving the local people in development programs due to their training and outlook, and
- d) they can reach the poorest level, and utilize participatory means of involving the people in development initiatives.

The mobilization and motivation of grass roots organizations will ensure that the local people are full participants in the development process. They are the ones who will plan, prioritize, decide, implement and evaluate development projects. These should, generally, be appropriate and sustainable since the initiative comes from the very people who will be affected by the project rather than some bureaucrat sitting in Manila or here in Kathmandu.

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## Intermediary

An NGO or a development worker can act as an intermediary between the village/community and the bureaucracy. An NGO is better placed to understand the problems, needs and aspirations of the local people as they operate within a small geographical area and spend longer in the field with their constituents - the villagers. Meanwhile the bureaucrats have much larger areas of responsibility ensuring heavier workloads and hence, less opportunity and time to focus on any specific problem. These two interlocking factors would suggest an intermediary role for NGOs. They can put a strong and reasoned case for the villagers in front of the bureaucrats and in return, put the opposing case of the constraints and problems faced by the Government in front of the villagers. I hastily add that I am not suggesting NGOs should become "apologists" for Government inaction or corruption, but rather provide a facilitative service between the friction of village needs and Government resources, and can try to ensure that bureaucrats are transparent over proposed development plans and are in some way accountable to those who could be affected by the project.

## Catalyst

NGOs can spark the process of development by the attitude they display towards their activities, the way they respond to the local people, their knowledge and views. NGOs by asking the "right" questions which will initiate a process of reflection and debate among the people can get the "ball rolling" - so to speak, for an indigenous, grass roots development initiative. This is the catalyst role, which can only be undertaken if the people of the area, trust and respect the organization or individual. They can also catalyse the people by providing the appropriate assistance which enables the people to surmount a particular obstacle. For instance, keeping irrigation and Bajhang in mind, a breach has occurred in a cement-lined canal. The locals may not have the technical skills and/or materials to repair it. A catalytic organization would organize the locals to raise the funds to pay for the cost of a specialist and the materials. This organization would then find and provide a specialist, who would not only repair the breach but would at the same time teach the locals the skills to do the job themselves next time, and get the required cement.

NGOs, by being innovative, can undertake new activities and test new ideas. In terms of irrigation for example, they can undertake mobilization and motivation activities so that government sponsored irrigation systems could be handed over to the local communities. If this proves successful, the NGO can play a catalytic role in spreading the idea, and persuading those with power and budget, such as the Government, to take notice and encouraging them to adopt it on a wide-scale.

NGOs can act as catalyst in changing some of the contradictions inherent within the Government bureaucracy - firstly, it is not in the interest of bureaucrats to ensure a transformative development of rural people leading to their empowerment, since it would reduce their power and authority. And secondly, the bureaucrats do not possess the right "mindset" to support or help the villagers. NGOs can pass on some of the lessons they have learnt so that the bureaucrats can become more effective development workers.

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## Empowerment

The long term goal of all rural development NGOs should be to put themselves out of business. At present they have a genuine role to play, but they must strive to enable and empower the rural communities to take responsibility for their own development process. This can only come about if the NGO consciously and earnestly aims to build up the self-confidence of all sections of village society through such programmes as, legal literacy campaigns, and adult and functional literacy programmes among others. This process involves giving the villagers the opportunity to reflect on their needs and problems, prioritize their needs and decide on the development initiatives to be attempted.

Empowerment needs to occur at all levels, even with bureaucrats and the Government. At this macro-level NGOs can, and in other countries have, provided the necessary constituency and intellectual support through mobilization of people and in-depth research, for Governments to challenge long-standing orthodoxies. For instance, in the Phillipines, NGOs have forced the Government to scrutinise all loans accumulated during the Marcos regime to determine their legitimacy (Clark 1991). It can even occur here in Nepal for loans accepted during the Panchayat era.

## Networking

Networking involves the building up of strong networks of like-minded NGOs. These networks can a) act as a forums for debating developmental issues and theories, b) exchange information and swap experiences and lessons, and c) give voice to NGOs, so as to generally build up a supportive environment for small-scale, transformative development initiatives. It will provide mutual support and motivation thereby overcoming any sense of isolation that may be present. NGOs, through networking both within Nepal, or Southern countries, could create a climate which may change the course of the present developmental paradigm. This change cannot and will never occur without strong webs of support and information exchange.

In terms of irrigation NGOs can facilitate networking between farmers groups involved in irrigation throughout the country, so that these groups do not feel isolated. They can share ideas and experiences, and visit each other to foster solidarity and train each other in some particular technique or lesson the other has found useful.

## Advocacy

The NGO, which mobilizes grassroots organises and is involved in popular participation, will soon realize the importance of the macro policy and institutional environment for during the course of its work it will come against established obstacles. One soon realizes that if the NGOs work to promote sustainable development is to be successful the NGO itself has to move the Government to remove policies which actively discourage self-reliant local initiative. A good example, though not about irrigation, is highlighted by Stephen Mikesell (1992) in his paper, "The New Local Government Law : Diluted Raksi in an Old Bottle" in which he states, "Close analysis of the logic of this new law and the projected form of its implementation shows that the participatory terminology is mere window dressing for a law that gives no new substantial governmental powers to the people, while reintroducing institutions that extend bureaucratic control further into the villages." NGOs working in the

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irrigation field can undertake advocacy activities which enables the local communities to take charge of their water resources.

### **Conclusion**

At present NGOs have a "window of opportunity" to influence the shape of projects being executed by official agencies and, more importantly, to influence critical aspects of development policies itself. In terms of micro-level activism NGOs can facilitate the incorporation of local communities into the development process. Both levels have to be utilised if NGOs are to play any meaningful role in irrigation management.

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