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## The Potential of NGO Networking in Irrigation Management

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### Executive Summary

With the growing importance and strength of NGOs in Nepal, owing to their better manageability, freedom from bureaucratic processes and delays, better understanding of the local realities and mobilization of local support, they have the advantage for more effective field-level operations. To date, they have shown readily apparent strengths in rural service delivery and poverty alleviation works.

With the increased number of NGOs in the country, the need for networking is also being realized. The NGO Forum-Nepal is one of the organizations which is trying to develop a bottom-up networking approach in Nepal. With its growing membership base, the NGO Forum-Nepal's networking system is a means to share the experiences of one another, to avoid duplication of work that so often happens in many areas of operation, to create a more effective program planning and implementation through cumulative support and development of its manpower/volunteer base, and to create a better consciousness-raising among the people by disseminating information faster and creating more sustained interest, and thus a better groundwork for positive action among the NGOs's targeted beneficiaries. To develop a strong networking system, several regular activities have been initiated such as the District Forums, Nepali and English publications for increasing the level of awareness and interest, strategy planning sessions, and resource centers both at the central and district levels.

On the other hand, in the irrigation sector, very few NGOs are operating and, networking in this area has not yet been initiated. NGOs in many development sectors are gradually developing but redirection needs to be done to organize the present farmer user groups into active NGOs in the irrigation sector and come into the fold of NGO networking. With Nepal's long tradition of farmer-managed irrigation, water users can manage the irrigation schemes and can mobilize local resources for construction and O&M. As self-reliant, manageable groups, these NGOs can best utilize their inherent strengths in developing either farmer-managed or agency-managed systems, participating actively in its system design and development, in using and maintaining them, and in evaluating the system from their own perspective. The sense of group ownership, responsibility and autonomy can be further developed and sustained given a legal mandate of these otherwise fragmented groups in the irrigation sector. As the NGO Forum and other organized groups in the other sectors have already initiated the networking concept to benefit its member NGOs, those water user groups NGOs in the irrigation sector can likewise learn from the experience and benefit from the many advantages of NGO networking.

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## **Background**

NGOs in Nepal have grown from solely religious-oriented, service delivery organizations to developmental partners with many facets. While compared with that of its neighboring countries, Nepalese NGOs have yet to grow and be used to its highest potential. Nevertheless, over the recent years, they have shown their apparent strengths, primarily in rural service delivery and in poverty alleviation works.

Because of the NGOs' often small size and hence, better manageability, as well as their freedom from bureaucratic processes and delays that so often characterize government and other large-scale programs, they have the advantage for more effective field-level operations. They are also often better placed than line agencies to respond to the actual needs of the rural mass as the groups (i.e. NGOs) are by themselves the spontaneous creation of local communities, thus they understand better the local realities and can mobilize local support more readily than line agencies do.

## **NGO Networking**

After the recent political change in the country, many smaller NGOs were established, focusing on wide issues such as rural development, to more specific objectives such as environmental management, health service delivery, women's development and so on. Despite the growing number of NGOs and the expansion of those that have been in operation for many years, there has not been any networking system, aside from that provided by the Social Service National Coordination Council (SSNCC) which was instituted in 1976 by His Majesty's Government as the umbrella organization of the Nepalese NGOs. However, it has been observed that SSNCC has poorly directed its activities towards the concept of developing strong networking with spontaneously favored participation of NGOs within the umbrella. It operated with the government mandate to control and administer the NGOs in the country. Hence, its experience working for the NGO sector for a long period left no tangible impact. SSNCC's six committees which are supposed to be creating program networking did not give much importance to the agricultural sector and neither to the irrigation sector. Realizing many shortcomings, SSNCC is undergoing major changes including revision in the Social Service Act - to the extent that even the name of the SSNCC has been proposed to be changed once the new NGO act is passed.

In other words, while some NGOs are doing very good works and achieving high impact in the rural villages, there is very little sharing of information and experiences among NGOs, particularly with those less able. And in many cases even the good experiences are not shared or known to many who could have benefitted from such experiences. Similarly, the bad experiences that could have been avoided by learning from the previous ones are not heard of.

With the increased number of NGOs in the country, the need for networking is also being realized, and has resulted in some good efforts. NGO Forum-Nepal is one of the organizations which is trying to develop a bottom-up networking approach in Nepal. So far we have heard some of the efforts of networking that have just started such as those dealing with the environment and the health sector. However, at this stage it is very difficult to assert to what extent these networking efforts have been effective. As we know, very few NGOs are working in the irrigation system and networking in this area has not yet been initiated.

## The NGO Forum and Its Networking Approach

The NGO Forum-Nepal, established in 1991 by a core group of seven member NGOs operating in the various districts of the country, is basically concerned with the use of NGO networking for the benefit of its member NGOs. Now with its growing membership base, the NGO Forum-Nepal's networking system is a means to share the experiences of each another, both good and bad, with the good experiences serving as a role model and the bad ones serving as warnings to avoid the same failures. The networking was also conceived as a means to avoid duplication of works that so often happens in many areas of operation, with both the government, NGOs and INGOs, and commonly, the private sector. It was also conceived to create a more effective program planning and implementation through cumulative support and development of its manpower/volunteer base. It was also intended to create a better consciousness-raising among the people by disseminating information faster and creating a more sustained interest, and thus a better groundwork for positive action among the NGOs' targeted beneficiaries.

To develop a strong networking in Nepal NGO Forum has taken lead in establishing a number of regular activities as given below:

- **District Forum:** The concept of a district forum is basically to create an informal program-wise network for sharing information at the action level and to create a database for better program co-ordination. NGO Forum assigns a member organization to act as the focal point and co-ordinate the district forum. Six monthly networking meetings (according to the need, the frequency is adjusted in different programs) are held in each program area at a convenient place in the district with the active support of the co-ordinating NGO at the district. Participation in this networking meeting (the 'district forum') is open to all NGOs, government line agencies and any other institution or organization working or interested in the related field. All receive invitations from the co-ordinating organization to attend the meeting in advance. The co-ordinating agency provides the basic facility to hold such a forum and does the secretarial work too. Participation in the forum is voluntary. The data created by this regular forum becomes a part of the data base of the forum in the district which is pooled at the central level and kept in the computerized form for better sharing of information with all the concerned agencies for co-ordination purpose. Hence, by this system it is hoped to encourage full participation of existing organizations in districts, in as much as being left out of the forum can likely reduce their image and credibility in the eyes of other organizations and agencies working in the district and their isolation from others can be viewed with suspicion. In effect, it is hoped to create a pressure to join the district forum and be part of the mainstream. A standard form is developed for information sharing by the NGO Forum which is used uniformly by all the district forums. The first such district forum has been started in Jhapa district. Its first meeting is planned to be held on 20th of September 1992. The other District Forums in the offing are in Gorkha in the western region, in Dang in the Mid-Western Region and probably in Nuwakot in the Central Development Region. If this initial approach is successful, this can be replicated in any other program area later.
- **Publication:** To supplement the District Forum and to create a higher level of awareness and interest in such networking, regular publication is desired. At present, the NGO Forum publishes two news bulletins, one in Nepali (quarterly) called *SAHABHAGI* ("participant"),

and the other one in English (half yearly) called *NGO Updates* which is targeted to the policy level people at the central level and all the concerned donor and expatriate communities. These publications highlight the district level activities of different NGOs and other agencies, and introduces the work of lesser known small NGOs. These are distributed free of cost (initially) to all the NGOs, related line agencies, district level key authorities and informants and at the central level to all the related agencies and organizations. We are hoping that these publications will slowly develop as a true people's developmental news magazines and will reach a broader section of people at the grass roots level.

- **Strategy Planning Sessions:** In these sessions, yearly program activities are assessed, the next year's program of action lined up, and strategies developed based on the district situation of each NGO. The report of the strategy planning session is published and made available to all the member NGOs.
- **Resource Center:** The NGO Forum maintains a Resource Center at both the district level and at the central level. Detailed program-wise data and the agency-wise activities are kept in the Resource Center's data bank. All the publications and any relevant documents/materials are also maintained in the central Resource Center. At present, our Resource Center is focusing more on the education, environment and health sectors. As more and more NGOs will start coming in the agriculture/irrigation sector, we may be able to also include this sector in the Resource Center.

### **NGO Networking in Irrigation Management**

It has been documented that 30% of the present surface water irrigation development system in Nepal is agency-managed and 70% farmer-managed. Similarly, of the total irrigated area recorded as being developed using groundwater in the Terai, 73% is under farmer-managed tubewells and the rest is under agency management. Hence, these figures show that more than two-thirds of Nepal's water surface irrigation development has been carried out by the private sector.<sup>2</sup>

It has also been documented that the overall performance of the government-managed surface water irrigation system in Nepal has been poor, which means considerable losses in production impact. It has also been asserted by specialists in the sector that among the major causes of this poor performance are inadequate system design, unsatisfactory system management and insufficient operation and maintenance budgets and expenditure. Moreover, it has also been said that there was a lack of beneficiary involvement in system design, construction and operation. Farmers also often lament the lack of a sense of ownership over the facilities given to them and no commitment to maintain the structures. Since more often than not, the organization of water users groups was left till after construction was over and even, then was done very superficially, farmers view the system as public facilities which the government is obliged to operate and maintain. Similarly, the farmer-managed schemes are often beset with the problem of the high cost of maintenance and the increasing difficulty in mobilizing voluntary labor, particularly when off-farm labor opportunities are at its peak.

<sup>2</sup> *Nepal Agricultural Sector Review, the World Bank, March 1990.*

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Hence, they often seek government assistance for O&M, which if not given, may lead to the gradual unavailability of many systems.

It has also been said that the new thrust in irrigation policy recognizes that the government alone, with its limited resources, cannot handle the substantial requirements for irrigation development and management. Hence, water users themselves will need to play a key role in sustaining irrigation services.

In terms of irrigation investments, it has also been observed that the expansion of private shallow tubewells in the Terai is largely constrained by the large number of small holdings and the fragmentary nature of these holdings, indicating that relatively few farmers can afford to invest in shallow tubewells on their own. Therefore, to further expand shallow tubewell operations, it has been suggested that group ownership and the use of shallow tubewells should be actively promoted.

With this background, if users groups can be organized into active NGOs, and with the advantages of NGOs manageability and less bureaucratic constraints, along with the networking concept, they can play a substantial role in the promotion of farmer-managed irrigation schemes and promoting institutionalized group ownership.

Organizing the water users groups into the field of active NGO management can be a viable process of institutionalizing the people's strength in this sector. With Nepal's long tradition of farmer-managed irrigation, water users can manage irrigation schemes and can mobilize local resources for construction and O&M. With stronger NGOs in this sector, networking can be established and sustained to achieve efficiency in the following areas of irrigation management:

a) in developing the system

In view of the disappointing irrigation performance trends in recent years, the government's reoriented strategy and policy calls for greater reliance on the private sector through farmer participation. The establishment or expansion of NGOs at the district level can be directed to the agriculture sector which is the traditional source of livelihood of the large majority of the rural population. In the agriculture sector, even if the agricultural support system is not yet well developed, each individual thinks consciously about their agricultural support system. Indeed, this growing tendency of farmers to be more concerned to have better access to technology, supplies, manpower and even credit support system which at times are community-initiated, should be institutionalized through the formation of NGOs in the irrigation sector. As strong and active NGOs, and with legal mandate and bearing, these organizations can have a larger say in all stages of irrigation development that are targeted for their benefit.

b) in using and maintaining the system

With the NGOs' principle of self-reliance and the networking concept, the farmer-managed systems can be assisted in developing and/or strengthening the mechanism for maintaining local initiative, responsibilities and autonomy. The networking can also facilitate the sharing of experiences, including the necessary liaison opportunities with line agencies and other concerned sectors on matters that concern the development, use and maintenance of the system.

The NGOs' strength of advocacy can be put to its best use by demanding from the concerned agencies a greater sense of accountability to farmers they are supposed to serve. As improved services is a prerequisite for better cost recovery, the irrigation system NGOs organized can

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also be strengthened in the area of cost recovery, which has been a serious bottleneck in many public irrigation systems in the past. Some better system on water charges payment schemes can be developed, either among themselves as water user groups/NGOs, or through other external systems; whoever can efficiently handle the high rate of payment of which would be the determining factor for improved services from the concerned line agencies. Given the opportunity to participate at the outset in the system design and development, efficient and cost effective use and maintenance can be expected from the users groups NGOs.

c) in evaluating the system

Evaluation is part of the total system's process. In this case, such evaluation must emanate from the farmers point of view. As long as the farmers can feel the difference from the past our perspective must emerge from these indicators. Institutionalizing such monitoring indicators and evaluation techniques will be highly beneficial for program networking through NGOs.

## **Conclusion**

NGOs in many development sectors are gradually developing but there is a need for refocusing to organize the present farmer user groups into active NGOs in the irrigation sector. As self-reliant, manageable groups, these NGOs can best utilize their inherent strengths in developing either farmer-managed or agency-managed systems, participating actively in its system design and development, in using and maintaining them, and in evaluating the system from their own perspective. The sense of group ownership, responsibility and autonomy can be further developed and sustained by giving a legal mandate to these groups, otherwise they would remain fragmented and isolated from each other. As the NGO Forum and other organized groups in the other sectors have already initiated the networking concept to benefit its member NGOs, those water user groups NGOs in the irrigation sector can likewise learn from the experience and benefit from the many advantages of NGO networking.