

The Role of NGOs in Irrigation Management in Nepal: Some Tentative Issues

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Introduction

In the past few years Nepal has witnessed a mushrooming of NGOs. Some are genuine while others exist only on paper. There seems to be a confusion in terminology too when the organizations are characterized as either non-profit or profit oriented, private, public, or voluntary. Despite these confusions, there is a potential for a positive role of the private sector in irrigation development through a more decentralized process.

At the policy level, the government of Nepal wants to "turnover" selected currently agency managed irrigation systems (less than 500 ha in the hills and less than 2000 ha in the plains) to the farmers. The government proposes joint/participatory management with the water users organizations (WUOs) in larger agency systems. At the same time, the irrigation bureaucracy is being "thinned out" and a greater role for the farmers through their water users organizations is envisaged. The necessary legislation, policies, and guidelines are being prepared but have not yet been field tested. Many of the activities that were previously undertaken by the government are gradually being turned over to the non-government sector.

Given the supportive environment for the growth of NGOs and the fact that there are financial, managerial, and expertise constraints within the government to allocate resources so as to manage and operate government irrigation systems, a positive role for NGOs in organizing and strengthening water users organizations is envisaged. The NGOs can facilitate the transfer of power currently held by the government in their systems to the farmers themselves as is the government's current policy for certain irrigation systems. The NGOs should therefore have the capacity to provide training, conduct research, and undertake information/communication exchange activities related to irrigation management so as to facilitate this transfer of power and management. NGOs can be very instrumental in targeting those very groups of the underprivileged who have been bypassed by "development". NGOs can bring about poverty alleviation in targeting the resource poor. Access to and management of irrigation could be one avenue that NGOs could undertake to fulfill their community development objective.

To date, there are very few NGOs involved in irrigation. There are however several international NGOs that have a history in irrigation involvement in Nepal. These NGOs have also had interactions with local NGOs in their various activities. IIMI feels the need for promoting the role of NGOs in irrigation management. NGOs at various levels could fulfill certain objectives of the broad goal of enhancing irrigation management in Nepal.

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NGOs though they are skilled and knowledgeable in community development processes seldom have the skills and knowledge related to irrigation organizations and management. NGOs skills in communicating with rural communities and agency staff will be very helpful in bridging the gap between agencies and farmers as well as facilitating the process for farmer control of irrigation systems. This workshop has been organized to explore the positive role of NGOs in irrigation management.

Workshop Objectives

The main objectives of this workshop are:

- a) to bring together relevant NGOs involved in irrigation and discuss their experience, lessons learnt, and problems encountered.
- b) to bring together relevant NGOs and discuss their potential role in organizing and training rural-based NGOs for irrigation development.
- c) to formulate a strategy for organizing rural based NGOs to be implemented by a network of government and private sector agencies involved in irrigation development, and
- d) to organize the above mentioned working network which will: a) organize rural NGOs; b) train rural NGOs; c) match rural NGOs' capability with agency and project consultants' needs; and d) train national NGOs in irrigation management.

We had solicited papers that dealt with the following topics:

- a) Specific experience of an NGO or several NGOs in irrigation development. { The focus was to be on case study or studies of NGO experience in irrigation management. The actual processes undertaken, lessons learned, and problems encountered were to be highlighted. }
- b) Experience of Rural-based, grass roots NGOs in Community/Natural resources development and irrigation management. { Actual case studies and issues involved were to be highlighted with specific examples. }
- c) International NGOs' and National NGOs' collaboration in irrigation management: Current Experience, Potential and Future Roles. { The nature of collaborative efforts, the issues involved, lessons learned, and problems encountered were to be emphasized with specific examples. }
- d) Government Policies: Acts, Regulations, Directives and Guidelines for NGO Participation in Irrigation Development. { A critical analysis of policy and legal framework promoting or stifling NGO movement in natural resource management and irrigation development was to be undertaken with specific examples wherever possible. }
- e) Potential role of NGOs in irrigation management and the possibility of creating a network of NGOs working on irrigation management. { This network concept was to be substantiated by examples of similar networks of NGOs in other natural resource management activities. The relationships with government and other private sector agencies were also to be examined. Suggestions to foster and sustain such a network were also to be elaborated. }

- f) Perceptions of two major irrigation bureaucracies, i.e., on the potential role of NGOs (local or rural-based) in their irrigation programs. (The paper was to focus on one bureaucracy alone substantiating its policy framework and attitudes and current activities regarding NGO involvement in irrigation.)

We have all indeed benefitted from the presentation of papers by the various authors and the subsequent discussions. A definite highlight was the presentation made by the farmer representatives which illustrated the time-tested organizational capacity and appropriate technologies of the irrigation groups, which to a great extent, are the major actors in irrigation development in Nepal. Their member-based organizations (which may not be registered under formal legal provisions) carry out irrigation service oriented activities. These organizations and their functionaries have been involved in irrigation tours, studies, training and consultancies -- far more effective than what "outsiders" have been able to achieve. We indeed marvel at their knowledge, skills, and organizational capacity which other member-based NGOs can emulate. It is with this concern that we propose, as a specific objective of this workshop, the recognition of these farmer groups and the necessity of promoting these member-based rural organizations.

In view of the papers that we heard and the discussions that we participated in, I have listed some tentative issues for further discussions regarding the role of NGOs in irrigation development and management. Since we spent quite some time discussing about the nature and types of NGOs in several of the session, I propose that we discuss other topics during this session. Likewise since the issues of policies and legal provisions need further background study and preparation, I propose that we leave this topic out of our discussion too. However, I have included both of these topics in the following list for future reference.

The following are some of the issues and topics related to the general and irrigation specific aspects of NGOs and the network:

Nature and Varieties of NGOs

What do we mean by NGOs?

What are the various types of NGOs? e.g., profit-oriented organizations, non-profit oriented organizations, grass roots organizations, charitable relief organizations, local/community development organizations, or those that are oriented towards structural change, etc.

What are the relative advantages/disadvantages or weaknesses/strengths of these different types of NGOs given their different mandates, structures, resource mobilization, etc.. in relation to each other (i.e., the NGOs themselves) and in relation to the government?

What existing policies and institutional arrangements foster or stifle them meeting their objectives?

What types of NGOs foster irrigation management and for what aspects of irrigation management and development?

Law and Policy

What are the existing legal and policy provisions for the establishment of NGOs?

What types of NGOs are promoted by the existing legal and policy provisions of the government?

Do these types of provisions stifle certain innovative types of NGOs?

Is autonomy of certain NGOs guaranteed by certain legal provisions? Which types of legal provisions for which types of NGOs? Which legal provisions do not guarantee autonomy? How is NGO accountability ensured?

What changes or types of new legal provisions are necessary to foster natural resource management and community development oriented NGOs?

Resource Mobilization (internal and external)

What are the different mechanisms for resource mobilization or fund raising adopted by the various NGOs?

To what end are these resources used?

On the basis of resource mobilization and allocation, which types of NGOs would be more suitable for promoting institutional development in irrigation management, e.g., facilitating the formation of water users organizations, training of agency staff on community or farmer-oriented development, etc.

Can the different NGOs still retain their autonomy even if resources are mobilized from outside donors. How is accountability ensured?

Should there be a change in the tax structure and tax incentives so that resources can be mobilized from within Nepal for and by Nepali NGOs?

What are the relative advantages and disadvantages of resources mobilized through: i) tax deduction/incentives (Nepali donors wishing tax deductibles), ii) grants and loans from donors, iii) loans from banks, and iv) government money allocations? The above are to be seen within the context of sustainability of NGOs, fulfillment of objectives while retaining autonomy of the NGO.

NGOs Role In Irrigation Management

What are the comparative advantages of government agencies and specific types of NGOs in the various activities of irrigation management?

What are the specific activities that NGOs can undertake to support government's policies in joint management and turnover?

What types of NGOs have comparative advantage over other NGOs in irrigation management?

What specific role can certain (specify which ones) NGOs have on the following:

- construction
- maintenance

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- operation
 - institutional development of farmers
 - training to WU construction, O&M, WU's roles and responsibilities
 - training to agency staff and technical campus students in water management, farmer interaction, and community/farmer oriented development
 - policy recommendations
 - research
 - irrigation database management

Farmer-Based NGOs

Is there a need for such member-based NGOs?

If yes, how can these be promoted? What legal provisions exist or need to be created for the promotion of these NGOs?

On what existing institutional arrangements can these be promoted and guided?

At the initial period, how can the sustainability of these NGOs be maintained in terms of work and funds?

What specific role can these NGOs play in terms of:

- training other farmers where irrigation projects are underway
- policy and legal enactment recommendations to government regarding irrigation management and development
- developing farmer management capabilities
- assisting in the redefinition of government/farmer management rights
- assisting in dispute resolution between communities, and between community and government
- assisting in the transfer of farmer technology and indigenous knowledge
- assisting in the development of appropriate irrigation technology that can be maintained and operated by the water users themselves
- assisting in facilitating the formation of water users associations
- conducting joint research in irrigation management

Network and Coalition-Building

Is there a need for an NGO network for irrigation management and development? Why?

How can such a network be supported and promoted without it being controlled or coopted by either the government or some donor? In other words, should it maintain its own autonomy? How is accountability ensured?

How can INGOs help promote the growth of this network?

Similarly, how can the government and banks support this network?

What legal and institutional framework would be necessary for its maintenance?

Should government agencies, donors, and banks be included in the network? Why? What would be their contributions to the network (not necessarily in terms of funds)?

What types of NGOs are to be represented in the network?

What mechanism and strategy would be relevant for the promotion of such a network? Could an ad hoc network be created so as to start the process and streamline future strategy and activities for the network's growth?

What should be the network's scope of work and its relationship with the government?

Should the network facilitate the following and if yes, how? :

- information exchange
- cooperation and joint action
- negotiate with foreign donors
- act as a channel for disbursement of funds
- present a stronger front in negotiations with government
- grass root mobilization, development, and creation of awareness in various interests groups regarding irrigation management issues
- link farmers and agency expectations and needs
- empower water users and local communities

I hope the discussion on the four topics will guide us towards exploring the role of NGOs in irrigation development and management.

Summary of the Workshop Discussions

The summary of the papers are presented above and the following will deal briefly with the discussions on the papers presented and the issues raised.

Discussions on Papers Presented

The papers were divided into five topical sections dealing with: i) the general role of NGOs in the National Development of Nepal, ii) the experience and perception of the two major irrigation bureaucracies in their dealings with NGOs, iii) specific experience of NGOs that have been involved with irrigation development, iv) experience of rural-based NGOs in irrigation development and management, and v) NGO networking in irrigation management.

The discussions under the first topic revolved around the existing government capacity and the potential role of NGOs to bring about changes following alternative paths. A general concern regarding the apparent paternalistic attitude of the government through its policies and operational instruments was raised. It was felt that autonomy should be granted to the NGOs in the sense that they should not be government or donor driven. Positive experiences in NGOs promoting and facilitating participatory community development were shared.

The second topic drew in many controversies. A confusion over the terminology "NGO" occurred. Though one paper treated consulting firms as NGOs, other strongly opposed such a view. It seemed that the Department of Irrigation was accustomed to working with consulting firms, and to some extent with international organizations, but hardly with NGOs as non-profit development organizations. The issues of relative advantages and disadvantages of NGOs in comparison with other agencies were also discussed but only briefly. The papers on ADB/N were quite different in their approaches. In the discussion regarding how ADB/N dealt with NGOs it was clear that it too lacked experience working with national NGOs but had acquired experience with international ones. The potential role for NGOs to be involved in the irrigation activities of the bank was felt, however. But the modalities still had to be worked out, e.g., whether to ask for collateral from NGO or not, in what activities will NGOs be involved, etc.

The third topic revolved around specific activities of NGOs in irrigation systems. The presentations showed concrete activities that NGOs were involved in. The relationship between the type or nature of the NGO and its mandate, its development philosophy, and its program approaches were explored. Definitely, NGOs presented an alternative development approach. Certain NGOs were very innovative and even mediated to ensure the involvement of the community in projects that had consequences for the community. It was felt that NGOs can mediate and help empower local communities in their relationship with governmental or donor agencies. NGOs can enhance the local resource mobilization in community projects and help secure local contracts so that local employment and involvement can be guaranteed. The experiences of a specific international NGO was also explored and the avenues for collaborations with government agencies.

The session on the experience of rural based organizations was very informative. The farmer representatives shared with the participants their experiences in running irrigation systems as their major livelihood strategy. It was clear to everyone that these were the ones who really, at the grass

roots itself, brought about definite irrigation development and management. Some of these organizations had experience in training other farmers, orienting politicians and technicians on the institutional and organizational aspects of irrigation management, and participating in farmer to farmer exchanges. It was agreed that these rural based organizations should be promoted and due recognition and promotion of indigenous knowledge and technology should be made.

The session on networking and research or data gathering was informative for exploring the potential of newer technologies and methodologies for irrigation data base and the creation of a irrigation NGO network. The practicality and feasibility of Geographic Information System (GIS) was questioned in terms of the costs associated, the utility for field level work, and also the utility for farmers managing their own systems. The network models as applied to Agro-forestry and other development programs like education were explored as possible approaches to follow.

Workshop Issues

An issues paper was presented tying it with the workshop objectives and the attempt to explore the positive role of NGOs in irrigation development and management. Since the discussion sessions had already to an extent explored the controversial issues of the nature/types of NGOs and whatever legal provisions existed that promoted or stifled the growth of NGOs, the discussion was limited to the other four topics outlined in the paper. The participants were divided into two groups, one dealing with resource mobilization and NGO role in irrigation management, while the other group discussed farmer-based NGOs and Network and coalition-building.

The group that discussed the resource mobilization and NGO role in irrigation management pointed out that resources could be classified as: human, material, financial, informational, and technological. Resource mobilization could occur through i) existing village committees (wherever they exist), ii) local financial and other institutions, donors, the government, local government, and village or district development committees. It recommended a tri-partite arrangement between the funding source, village committees, and the NGOs. It also recommended the use of local skills and knowledge and the need to tap traditional information sources. This group was of the opinion that NGOs can bring about cost effective, good management, and equitable but adaptable/flexible approaches to operation and maintenance. NGOs can also play the role of motivators or facilitators for institutional development and provide training towards this. They can be rural based too. NGOs could be seen performing activities related to implementation and well as those of facilitators. NGOs could be seen involving themselves in all activities of the irrigation project cycle including evaluation and other non-technical activities like institutional development, training, policies, research, and extension.

The group that discussed farmer based NGOs and Network and Coalition were of the opinion that these farmer based organizations have not been registered and that the policies of the government itself is not clear regarding the different liabilities, rights, and responsibilities under different acts and legal provisions. The government ought to make these issues clear before such farmer based organizations can register. The process of registering should be made simple and practical. There was unanimous opinion that these farmer based organizations should be involved in the project right from the inception and that any agency involved in irrigation activities should take into account the concerns of the farmer groups. In such situations, these organizations are responsible in maintaining their own autonomy and standing. In terms of network and coalition building, it was felt that a network was definitely a must but first it would be useful to establish an ad hoc committee with members

drawn from NGOs, the implementing agencies, and farmer-based organizations. This ad hoc would have a mandate of one year. At the end of this year, a NGO network would be in place for irrigation management. The task of the ad hoc committee would be to explore the modality for the formation of the network, create awareness among various irrigation actors as regards the potential role of NGOs in irrigation management, and promote and train and use the expertise of farmer-based NGOs.

The participants later on met and ratified this idea of an ad hoc committee that drew members from the Department of Irrigation, Agricultural Development Bank of Nepal, Farmer irrigation organizations of Palpa and Rupendehi districts, Institute of Agricultural and Animal Sciences, national NGOs, and the International Irrigation Management Institute(IIMI). A couple of institutional experts were also included as resource personnel. This group was to meet and chalk out the mandate, objectives, strategy and activities of the ad hoc committee for the establishment of the NGO network. It was decided that IIMI would play an advisory role and that the ad hoc committee would be housed within a national NGO.