



Projects for the Poor and Excluded: *Lessons from Community Development Programme in Nepal*

RRN implemented a wide-ranging rural community development project with a special focus on enhancing people's livelihood and capacity of the poor and excluded in 16 districts, out of a total of 75 districts in the country, covering Eastern, Mid - Western and Far-Western Development regions of the country since October 2004.



Vegetable farming supported by RRN in Siraha district

The Context

RRN's mission is to improve the lives of the poorest rural people, particularly rural women, peasants, landless people and other disadvantaged and socially oppressed strata of Nepalese society, by providing them opportunities for their own socio-economic empowerment. With the support of DFID-Nepal RRN implemented a wide-ranging rural community development project with a special focus on enhancing people's livelihood and capacity of the poor and excluded in 16 districts, out of a total of 75 districts in the country, covering Eastern, Mid-Western and Far-Western Development regions of the country since July 2003. The project aimed at providing an immediate, visible and positive impact on the target beneficiaries in order to reduce their socio-economic vulnerability and poverty by fulfilling their immediate needs of infrastructure and income generation that too during the period

of extreme conflict across the country. The project was focused on the demand converge approaches covering more than 15 different types of activities such as water supply, irrigation, school building and furniture support, road, culvert, hydro-power, ground water, micro-enterprise development, and institutional development.

This briefing paper provides the experiences of RRN pertaining to DFID funded 'community development programme' implemented in the rural Nepal for a period of over five years. The paper highlights the lessons learned from the implementation of development works, stakeholder collaboration and local ownership in the programme. The contents of this paper are based information generated through such techniques as direct field observation, focus group discussion, and informal interviews with the beneficiary communities. This was followed



Pani Ghatta (Water Mill) construction support at Korchabang, Rolpa district

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by a lengthy critical reflection on the programme by the project staffs who were involved in the information gathering about the programme.

In July 2003, the programme came into implementation phase in 16 districts in east, mid-west and far-west including those severely affected by the then 'violent conflict' between the government and the Maoist insurgents. Obviously, the progress of the programme was also adversely affected by such events and incidents as frequent *Bandhs* (strikes and blockades) hindering the movement of people, means of transportation and operation of the business industrial sector in the country. These disturbances often caused the delay in the transportation and supply of the materials to the project sites for construction the physical infrastructures. With the passage of the time coupled with the price hike the programme also faced the shortage of the construction materials. The other difficulty facing RRN was the inability on the part of the government, which in fact was supposed to be supporting the programme as one of the major partners, to show its presence outside the district headquarters during the later part of the conflict.

Lessons Learned

(a) Project design

There is no blueprint for reducing the socio-economic vulnerability and poverty of the community beneficiaries. What appears as need is a design of the project that best suits their location and the context. Therefore, RRN's programme gave emphasis to the role and importance of the knowledge of the rural people in the process of design and implementation of development programme. Several examples from the project's assessment appropriately

illustrate the above. For instance, the project authorities together with field team visited the potential project locations and held discussions with the beneficiary communities. Following a series of discussions held with the targeted people, it was learnt that they had been impressed with the concerned programme, as it was based on their intimate need and the knowledge of local agro-ecological, physical, political, economic and socio-cultural conditions. Their suggestions were regarded and the decision to select the site was taken after verification with the concerned line agencies, the existing development organisations (I/NGOs, bilateral organisations and the local government institutions (DDCs/VDCs) in order to avoid possible duplications and for future collaboration with them.

Another example was the collection of project demands that came from the very backward areas and people facing severe problems owing to lack of proper rehabilitation of existing infrastructures shattered by the then conflict. RRN as a facilitator and the other stakeholders collectively developed the scheme through feasibility studies, baseline surveys, community preparation and social mobilisation, users' group formation, detailed survey, design and estimates.

Regular contacts and interaction with the beneficiary community helped understand their feelings and responses to the projects. Our stay with them in their villages, sharing the ideas with them and planning with them in fact led to creation of a congenial environment to work without being skeptical as well as hostile to each other even during the armed conflict situation. Additionally, such contacts and interactions resulted in the social acceptance of the project staff by the community.

(b) Implementation

With the implementation of the RRN projects over the years, the beneficiary communities have developed and refined valuable knowledge and problem-solving strategies not only in the field of resources management, but also in the areas of social organisation and mobilisation (e.g. by forming associations and groups for credit and savings, water use, home economics). We realised that their knowledge and experiences need to be tapped more systematically, and blended accordingly with "modern" technical knowledge suitable to the context and environment in which the people live and operate.

Our observation was that the use of local resources, peoples' knowledge and experiences really made the development activities and projects relatively easier to implement, and their impact was found to be far greater. Therefore, our attention was drawn to: the need to for an initiation from below and avoid a one-way, top-down approach to development. It should also be noted that design missions ought to carefully analyse all aspects related to the people's practices before designing any form of development intervention. These issues need to be analysed by undertaking special studies at the design phase, and kept uppermost during implementation so as to make the best use of locally existing skills and know-how and to ensure that the evolving requirements of the targeted populations are integrated into the project and implemented accordingly.

(c) The effects

The quick and timely service delivery by the project resulted in the quick impacts, as it was envisioned. Those farmers who were hardly able to cultivate even one crop due to lack of adequate rainfall in the monsoon season started growing three crops a year, thus keeping them engaged all round the year. The irrigation facility contributed to the food security of the poor and marginalised people, who earlier on did not have enough food for themselves. This implies the need for the projects that benefit the needy beneficiaries instantly. Some examples of benefits are that they have been able to earn a decent income from vegetable cultivation. For most poor in Nepal, agriculture is a major source of livelihoods and immediate household income.

Our experience in implementing the community development programme shows that even the poorest and most marginalised groups can benefit from involvement in diverse livelihood activities. The introduction of livelihood activities that caters to the needs of the target beneficiaries and the market has led to the increased access of the poor and marginalised people to human, social, physical and financial assets and self-reliance. They have begun to generate their own income through undertaking such self-employment activities as livestock, fruits, vegetables production, operating veterinary clinics, and candle making, beekeeping, etc.

The provision of safe drinking water through the project has saved the lives of many people in the project area from various types of water-borne



Market Shade built in Bayarban, Morang district

diseases. More importantly, the operation of drinking water schemes right in their villages has substantially reduced the drudgery of women who bear the sole responsibility of fetching water for the family from distant sources. Consequently, the women household members have utilised their free time in some income generating activities.

(d) Sustainability

As stated earlier, the project period also included the then armed-conflict. The methodology employed to sustain the programme in the conflict affected areas was that the communities were encouraged and enabled to demand their development needs, take initiatives on their own and contribute their resources for programme activities. RRN played the role of facilitator in the implementation of identified interventions and provided technical support. 'Do no harm' was the approach adopted to implement programme resulting in a harmonious situation without any deleterious effect to the stakeholders as well as the target beneficiaries.

For post-programme sustainability, RRN's assessment has illustrated the crucial importance to the development process of the knowledge of the local people, who have survived in their environs for centuries without huge amounts of money being spent on their development by governments or other agencies.

The direct physical and other forms of participation of the targeted communities in the entire project cycle was one of the main reasons contributing to sustainability of the projects. Their own participation provided them with a real sense of ownership and created an environment for making them emotionally

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Irrigation canal built in Bayarban, Morang district

Community development programme must be demand-driven, while interventions that are imposed in a top-down manner tend to lead to create confusion among the stakeholders in terms of their roles and responsibilities and failure to address the real needs of the target beneficiaries.

attached to the development schemes in their respective sites even after phasing out of the programme.

As per the RRN's exist strategy, the formation of 'Operation and Maintenance Committee' by converting the earlier 'Users Committee' to take care of the schemes being handed over to them was found to be a significant step towards building local institutions. Moreover, the training provided to the committee members to enhance their capabilities in the administrative and financial matters, besides other skills helped them operate the scheme effectively and efficiently without further the external assistance. These groups or committees have been keeping the activities going on through mobilisation of the funds they have generated. As it appeared, a strategic plan towards project's sustainability after the phase-out is not less important than that of an implementation plan of a project. The use of local resources and technology has rendered the projects cost effective and more sustainable, besides creating employment opportunities to the local people.

Sharing of benefits of the project among the

targeted communities in an equitable manner is another factor contributing to the sustainability of the project activities, and thus preventing from unnecessary disputes and conflicts among them.

(e) Reconsidering agendas and approaches

Our experiences based on the evidence show that if the quality of life of poor and vulnerable people is to be improved, attention has to be focused on the sectors that provide immediate safety net in order to prevent them from the fragile state in which they live, and creation of an enabling environment befitting the local situation and the context. Viewed from this approach, there is a need to include the poor and disadvantaged as the primary target groups in the policy regime and their needs be effectively incorporated into the implementation plan keeping in view the sustainability aspects as well.

It has also been our learning, from this project as well, that the programme interventions should take 'development from below' as its strategy and consider the local people as the focal point in planning, implementation, management and monitoring & evaluation and benefit sharing of development activities. We strongly realise that development programmes place emphasis on the importance of social, economic, institutional and environmental sustainability and encourage the adoption of an integrated approach. While we do so, our programmes also spontaneously need to respond to the policies and programmes of the local and national governments.

We have also learned that any community development programme, such as this one, must be demand-driven, while interventions that are imposed in a top-down manner tend to lead to create confusion among the stakeholders in terms of their roles and responsibilities and failure to address the real needs of the target beneficiaries.

Contributing authors : Neeraj N. Joshi and Kulchandra Dahal

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Published by : Rural Reconstruction Nepal (RRN)

P.O.Box: 8130, Kathmandu, Nepal.

Street Address: 288 Gairidhara Marg, Gairidhara, Kathmandu, Nepal.

Tel: 977-1-4427823, 4434165, 4425755, 4422153, Fax: 977-1-4418296 & 4443494

Email: rrn@rrn.org.np, Website: www.rrn.org.np

Rural Reconstruction Nepal (RRN), established in 1989, is a Nepali non-government, social development organisation involved in rural development, action-oriented research and policy advocacy focusing on peasants, poor women, dalits and indigenous nationalities, and other vulnerable communities through the process of facilitation, social mobilisation, empowerment and self-organisation. RRN's work is based on the four-fold approach to rural reconstruction covering: education to combat illiteracy and empower people to access their rights; sustainable livelihood to fight poverty; health to prevent disease, and self-government to overcome civic inertia.