



WATER, ENVIRONMENT AND MANAGEMENT

Role of NGOs in water and sanitation

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INTRODUCTION

History shows that development usually comes about not through external intervention but through ordinary people working collectively to meet their felt needs. The existence of Non Government Organisations (NGOs) is one manifestation of this. NGOs are voluntary groups of people who believe in the value of collective action for common good and who, traditionally, have used local resources to help meet local goals. Indeed, they can be said to be the oldest and most "grass rooted" development agencies in the world.

Their motivation is most usually based on the humanitarian ethic. When this is harnessed to address community development issues it has been shown to be a highly effective force for change and innovation.

NGOs are growing in numbers all over the World. In an increasingly complex modern age they are addressing a broader range of issues than ever before. They are qualified to do this not because they possess any particular expertise (usually they don't) but because they are attuned to the social and cultural conditions of local people and are in touch with their real concerns. These can take outside agencies many years to learn.

NGOs are therefore particularly well suited to implementing community participation centred projects. WaterAid's experience of working through local womens groups, Leo clubs, Red Cross groups and others, suggests that they are particularly keen and adept at implementing drinking water, health and sanitation projects.

Religious inspiration - local accountability

In Hindu societies, the construction of traditional water points such as dharas (water spouts) and hand dug wells has long been regarded as a sacred activity. The belief that religious merit may be won through implementing water projects is an important motivating factor in encouraging NGOs to take up this work.

Being locally based, these groups also have an interest to safeguard their social standing. Their reputation will depend on the successful completion of projects in acceptable periods of time. For this reason, they are likely to feel a keener sense of accountability to the community than might government officials.

Many communities clearly prefer to approach NGOs for assistance. They perceive NGOs as being more responsive and flexible than government and less encumbered by bureaucratic and other operational constraints. With over 60% of rural communities remaining unserved with safe water supplies in Nepal, there is no shortage of demand for assistance. Applications to technical and financial support agencies such as WaterAid are regularly oversubscribed (In 1992, by a factor of 4) and as registration procedures for NGOs ease, we must expect that this demand will continue to grow.

Water and sanitation projects can serve as a starting point for other development activities. NGOs tend to implement a broad range of projects across several sectors. Thus a community that establishes a good working relationship with one NGO may benefit from follow up activities (e.g. literacy classes,

small scale irrigation, bridge construction etc).

NGOs may be said to

- * help communities meet their felt needs
- * facilitate implementation through community participation
- * provide follow up and complementary development activities.
- * encourage the community to set up their own system of self-government (possibly based on the structure of the NGO).

Limitations and Needs

Most NGOs are concerned to provide services to underprivileged groups. But, while they will implement water projects with enthusiasm, there is a tendency to place a lower emphasis on important associated activities such as hygiene education and sanitation.

In general there is a need for NGOs to develop a better understanding of the development impact of their work. Training support is required to help them clarify objectives, plan, integrate and evaluate their activities. The overall goal of any NGO support agency might therefore be said to be: to help service delivery NGOs transform into development NGOs.

Ask NGO members in Nepal what they regard as the major constraints to their effectiveness, and they will probably come up with the following:

- * Lack of regular income
- * Lack of manpower
- * Lack of time to monitor implementation
- * Lack of technical and management know how.

If the role of NGOs is to be advanced then these issues will need to be squarely addressed. External support agencies must resist the temptation to limit funding to hardware items only and be prepared to provide institutional support to NGOs for extended periods covering several projects.

The potential of NGOs in the sector is beginning to gain the recognition it deserves. Provided local NGOs remain true to their humanitarian roots and avoid the temptation to use projects for party political or personal gain, then they can expect increased support from a wider range of donors than ever before. With conscientious implementation of projects they can build for themselves a reputation that will put pressure on government to improve its own performance. If this is realised, then the development impact of NGOs will extend far beyond that of simply quenching thirst.