



The role of local women's NGOs

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THE STEEP, MOUNTAINOUS terrain of the mid and high hills in central Nepal have made travel, communication, and delivery of services, such as drinking water systems, extremely difficult. Few roads and no railroads exist. Most travel is by foot.

Due to these difficulties and a severely restricted economy, government water systems have reached only one third of the rural hill villages in Nepal. Diarrhoeal disease leads to 44,000 deaths per year (Ali, 1991). In addition, the predominant concern for oneself rather than the common good of a community, and the belief that difficulties are one's fate (and therefore there is nothing one can do about them) have also hindered development. The commonly-held notion that "We have this problem, but we can't do anything about it unless the government or another organization comes and solves it for us" has also slowed development.

This paper shows some examples of how local village women in Okhaldhunga District in eastern Nepal were successful in bringing drinking water to their villages and in carrying out other development activities by forming their own local non-government organizations (NGOs). This was accomplished despite the traditionally low status and homebound situation of women in Nepali culture. The hindering attitudes were overcome by a spirit of working together learned by being part of their local NGO. Community activities by local NGOs can help to fill the great needs in community development not able to be filled by government services.

Bagale Gau

Early in 1990, the men and women of Bagale Gau saw that a similar community, an hour's walk from their village, had been able to build a drinking water system with assistance from the Rural Development Programme of the United Mission to Nepal (UMN), an international Christian NGO working in Nepal since 1954. The women organized a village meeting where men and women got together and decided to request technical assistance from UMN for building a drinking water system in their village.

UMN agreed to provide the pipe, cement and a technician-advisor if the village would provide all the labour, the rocks and sand, and carry all the supplies from the nearest roadhead. UMN required this big commitment of work from the village to build their sense of ownership in the system. Those communities who feel the water system

is theirs will be more likely to care for and maintain the system in the future.

The Bagale Gau women's group took a large role in building their water system. Sand for the concrete work was carried from the river. It took one full day to carry one bag of sand weighing 50kg. Nearly all of the 403 bags required for the system were carried by the women. Cement was also carried in 50kg bags; 45 bags from the roadhead, a 6-7 day round trip for each bag, and 20 bags from the district centre, a 2-3 day round trip. Women carried 50 per cent of these loads. One woman, Muga Sari Bishu Karma, carried single loads of 90kg of pipe and materials and her father, Purna Bahadur Bishu Karma, carried loads of 150kg. A remarkable record even in a country that is accustomed to portering heavy loads!

Once the materials were gathered, 20 men and 20 women from 40 households gathered to dig the trenches and build the tanks and taps. The pride and sense of ownership they feel was evident when they told us about a problem that arose.

About a year after the original construction, the inlet at one spring source clogged up with mud and debris. Because they had built it themselves, they both felt it was their own responsibility, and they had the knowledge and skills to clean it out and cover and seal the spring with rocks and cement plaster so that mud and debris could no longer be washed into the inlet. When a problem arose, they felt confident to handle it rather than being dependent on outsiders to come and solve it.

After six years, many water systems in Nepal fall into disrepair. However, the clean like-new appearance of the Bagale Gau system tells clearly of the pride and ownership the whole community feels in the system.

Okhaldhunga Bazaar

In contrast, the women of Okhaldhunga Bazaar built a water system with cooperation from the government. In the fall of 1994, eighteen women formed a group to help clean the footpaths in their area and encourage sanitation practices such as latrines. Shortly after that they repaired the dangerous bridge that led from the residential area to the supplemental water system tank. They had a main water system but the supply was quite irregular at best and completely dried up for four months of the year. About 40 households were dependent on the supplemental tank for water. However, the tank leaked badly and rapidly became useless. First, the women contacted the

government drinking water office and asked them to repair it. The official advised them that repair was not an economical nor long term solution. He suggested that they build an entirely new reservoir tank and tapstand.

The government drinking water office agreed to provide the needed cement, pipe, and a technician. The women's group took the responsibility of providing all the additional needed supplies and labour. They recruited help from a local youth club (a male group), and conducted a fund-raising campaign to pay for the needed hired labour and additional supplies. It was a happy occasion when the new tank and tap were dedicated on International Women's Day in March, 1996.

While the women did a great deal of work themselves including mixing cement plaster and concrete, procuring supplies, fund-raising, and the overall management of the construction project, this project is most impressive because of the good cooperation between the government office and a local non-government organization. This women's group took the initiative to seek what assistance was possible to obtain from the government, and then do the rest of the work on their own. It is hoped that their success will encourage other village groups to work together with their government officials.

Sarsepu

Four years ago, in 1992, twenty-two mostly illiterate women in the village of Sarsepu, who had never met together nor worked cooperatively before, met together to discuss ways to solve their problems. The problems they mentioned were the hours they spent grinding grain by hand because there was no mill near their village, the hours they had to spend carrying drinking water, and health problems related to an average of 7-9 births per woman, and lack of health care and sanitation.

They began work with a small and manageable project. They took a few hours of training and began home vegetable gardening to improve the nutrition and health of themselves and their families. Following that they started a literacy class. However, few women had the time to attend because of the time-consuming grinding of wheat and corn by hand.

This motivated the women to organize their community, and with the men's help, build a water-powered mill along a nearby stream. Following that, the number of women in literacy class immediately doubled.

After this, their confidence was raised and the community respected the group's work. They had four men as "advisors" to allay suspicions among the men about what was going on, and to encourage other men to allow their wives to attend. They took on more projects, such as the planting and protection of a community forest. Those owners whose livestock grazed there were fined 50 Nepali rupees (US \$1) for each seedling eaten. The fines went into the women's group treasury. Alcohol abuse was a big problem with the related problems of fights and wife beating. Fines were imposed on those consuming or

selling more than one bottle of alcohol at a time, with a resultant rise in the group's treasury, and a dramatic decrease in wife beating. Footpaths were repaired using volunteer labour. But the biggest project was the construction of the drinking water system.

The spring was located a 30 minute roundtrip (more than 1 km) from the village. It served 18 households in the village. The women took an active leadership role in community awareness; latrine construction; approaching UMN, as Bagale Gau had done for technical assistance; fund-raising for a maintenance fund (they assessed each household 500 Nepali rupees (US \$10)); and did at least 50 per cent of the construction labour. The other 50 per cent was done by male volunteers from the village. The women dug the ditches and buried the pipes, carried sand and stones from the river, helped to plaster the reservoir tank, and carried 30 per cent of the loads of materials from the roadhead (over a week's journey roundtrip). Households who were not able to work, such as mothers with young children and no male or other adult female, paid a fee in place of donating their labour. In the end, the spring catchment was constructed, the pipe laid, a tank built and eight tapstands erected. Two men and two women from the village took a one-week maintenance and repair training course. Now they do all the work themselves to keep the system functioning well.

The women of the Sarsepu women's group also arbitrate local disputes, especially when it is a domestic issue and there is no one else to stand up for the woman. For example, last year, Lakh Bahadur tired of his wife Sadha. He and his mother tried to get rid of Sadha, giving her the worst jobs, verbally and physically abusing her. Lakh Bahadur even took a second wife. The abuse continued. Repeatedly, the mother-in-law and Lakh Bahadur told Sadha that she was worthless and ought to go kill herself. Finally, in desperation, Sadha grabbed a rope and ran out of the house to hang herself. As Sadha was tying the rope, she thought of her daughter. She could not bring herself to leave her daughter alone with Lakh Bahadur and his mother. So instead of killing herself, she asked the women's group for help.

The group persuaded Lakh Bahadur to give Sadha a small plot of land. The women's group got together and helped Sadha build a small one-room house on the land where she and her daughter can live in peace on their own.

Wider influence

The women's successes have influenced and inspired other communities to work together for their own development.

In the spring of 1995, the village of Bhotechaur met to decide whether to build a system themselves with UMN assistance or have the government come and build one for them. A man named Sam encouraged the group to wait for a government-built system and save themselves all the hard labour of carrying, digging, and building. And,

besides, with the government program, if they did work, they would be paid for it, whereas under the UMN plan, all work was voluntary. Much discussion followed. Then Kusong Sherpa, the local Buddhist lama, stood to speak. He said he had visited water systems nearby, including Sarsepu, and he had seen many government-built systems that no longer functioned, abused and neglected by their villages. But in the very same area, the systems built "with their own sweat" were still operating and those people were drinking water!

Convinced by Kusong, the village voted to do it themselves. Construction began in February of this year and was completed within two and a half months, in time for the worst of the dry season which extends from April until June. The women of Bhotechaur no longer carry contaminated water from the nearby stream, but have clean spring water at a tap near their own home.

Conclusion

Women are often the ones who have the motivation for change. Whether it is starting kitchen gardens to provide vegetables at meal time, health care education to raise healthy children, or a drinking water system to save hours of carrying water, it is the women who are primarily affected, and therefore the more strongly motivated.

When the beneficiaries of the project are also the authors and implementers, the results tend to be sustainable for years and possibly for generations. Government agencies, external aid agencies, and NGOs who want to help rural communities need to tap into the motivation and skills of the women, and design the programmes that encourage people to do for themselves with minimal outside inputs. By so doing, such local groups learn how

to work on their own. This builds their capacity for sustainable development.

For women's groups interested in starting drinking water projects in their own communities, these lessons from the Okhaldhunga women's groups can serve as guidelines for success.

First, start with a small project to gain confidence and to learn to work together as a group, as well as to gain recognition in the community as capable, successful implementers of community improvements, in contrast to the stereotyped view of many men that women are limited to traditional rural household duties.

Second, while women can and often do take a leading role in such projects, they need to enlist the support of the men in the community in order to accomplish real lasting change; achieve unity, full participation, and a sense of ownership of the water system in their community; obtain additional construction skills; and to convince men to allow women to attend meetings and work activities by understanding what it is all about.

It has been our experience in Nepal that women's groups foster a spirit of caring for one another and working together. Once a group learns to work together and tries doing some projects on its own, they can discover that they do not have to wait for the government or some other organization to come and give them the solutions to their problems. They realize that there are many things they can do with their own resources to improve their own communities. This is the key to sustainable community development.

References

Ali, A. (1991) *Status of Health in Nepal*. Resource Centre for Primary Health Care, Kathmandu, Nepal.