

Chapter 1

Background: The Context of Rural Roads in Nepal

1.1 Historical Context of Road Development in Nepal

Prior to 1950, motorable roads in the country were almost non-existent. Until 1956, there were altogether 264km of metalled and 365km of fair-weather roads in and around the few main cities (Shrestha 1981).

During the period of the Fourth and Fifth Five Year Plans (1970-80), a regional development strategy was devised as an important policy guideline. A growth axis, based on the functional regionalisation principle, was spelled out in which the main north-south roads under the transport programme were designated as the spine of the growth axis. The country was divided into four development regions in 1972. Later the Far Western Development Region was further divided into two, making altogether five development regions, cutting across from north-south in order to affect economic linkages among diverse geographic regions, particularly between the mountains, hills, and the *Terai*.

The main idea was to develop a hierarchy of settlements with functional linkages. The regional centres were planned as viable growth centres with commercial and industrial activities. These centres, in turn, were to be linked with district headquarters and other potential growth points in a network covering the development region. At the district level, service centres were to be identified to support development. The development regions were rather visualised as administrative sub-divisions of the national territory and long-term investments were proposed without examining the regional resources (Gurung 1984).

During the period of the Sixth and Seventh Plans (1981-90), priority was given to the provision of minimum transport facilities to rural areas. A block grant was provided to the local self-governing bodies, such as the village and district *Panchayat(s)*, to plan and implement, among others, rural transport projects. These projects consisted of mule trails, foot tracks, and suspension and other types of small bridges in the hill and mountainous regions, whereas in the *Terai* they consisted of construction of culverts, drainage, and bullock-cart tracks. The projects were identified, along with other rural development projects, by the local *Panchayat* and implemented through the mobilisation of free labour contributions. During 1985-90, over 20 per cent of the local level projects implemented through local *Panchayat(s)* were on rural infrastructural development (Paudyal 1994).

Up to the end of 1989\90, 7,330km of road facilities were available in the country; out of these 2,958km were black topped, about 1,658km gravelled, and 2,714km were fair-weather road (NPC 1992).

In spite of the efforts made for the development of road transport, by 1997, 20 out of 75 districts had still not been connected with a motorable road network; these can only be

approached after walking one to several days. In fact, Nepal's topography enforces isolation in many parts of the country. Internal communications are poor in almost all hill and mountain districts. Most of the rural areas are connected through mule trails and foot tracks. The estimated total length of trails and tracks is reported to be 134,000km; and out of these 16,000km have been identified as main trails.

1.2 The Present Study: Context and Background

While transport facilities do not create development, they are essential for development to occur, therefore, the growth of farm productivity and non-farm rural employment is linked closely to infrastructural facilities. Road access can reduce isolation; permit people to move quickly and easily; stimulate crop production and marketing activities; encourage public services such as health, education, and government administration; and increase the potential for the transfer of technology and change. The World Development Report 1994 shows that an important ingredient in the success of rural enterprise in China has been the delivery of a minimum package of transport, telecommunications, and power at the village level. Similarly, countries that have made concerted efforts to provide infrastructure in rural areas, for example, Indonesia and Malaysia, have succeeded in reducing poverty dramatically (World Bank 1994).

In Nepal, road building interests people at all levels because road access brings about visible changes in village life and is regarded as a dramatic sign of development. Politicians, both at national and local levels, exert considerable pressure to secure road development projects for their constituencies. During the *Panchayat* Period (1960-1990) improvements to motorable roads, trails, culverts, and suspension bridges, under what was called the 'rural works' programme, were implemented by district and village *Panchayats* through mobilising people's participation. After the restoration of democracy in 1990, the rural works programme continues to be implemented through the District Development Committees (DDCs) and Village Development Committees (VDCs). Recently, when the government channelled resources directly to the VDCs under the 'Build Your Own Village Programme' and later under the 'Village Development and Self Reliance Programme', a sizeable share of the resources was spent on building rural roads.

The Eighth Five Year Plan (NPC 1992) identifies lack of adequate transportation infrastructure as one of the main problems for sustainable development of rural areas where a majority of the people live. Inadequate farm-to-market roads is one of the reasons why farmers from villages in the interior continue to face poverty. Therefore, the Eighth Five Year Plan emphasized the need for construction of farm-to-market roads and suggested that these be built as low-cost, fair-weather roads and maintained by the District Development Committees (DDCs) through mobilising people's participation.

Although a considerable amount of resources, both money and voluntary labour in the form of people's participation, has been spent on building rural roads during the last few decades, their services have been poor because of, among other things, the lack of maintenance and economic use. Many poorly constructed road projects also have negative environmental effects on the surrounding areas. Therefore, further expansion of rural roads for agricultural and rural development should be planned based on the quality of roads and their gainful use for sustainable development.

In recent years, some private engineering firms have collaborated with international donors to experiment with a low-cost, environmentally friendly and self-help (LES) approach to building rural roads. The LES approach to road construction as used in the Palpa and Dhading districts of Nepal is claimed to be cost effective and environmentally friendly. This approach could be used more widely for building rural roads in Nepal. It is in this context that this study examines the rural road programmes and their linkages with production processes and identifies problems experienced at various levels in making rural roads a part of the development process.

1.3 Objectives and Methodology

The study attempts to carry out the following.

- Examine the existing policies, institutional arrangements of rural roads, and their linkages with production processes
- Identify problems experienced at various levels to making rural roads a part of the development process
- Suggest policy and programme level arrangements for development.

The study was carried out at the policy, programme, and project levels. At the policy level, the policy environment, such as definition of rural roads; the rural road policy; institutional mechanisms at national, district, and project levels; and efforts on rural road development carried out in the past were analysed. At the programme level, attention was given to identification, design, approval, implementation, and operational procedures of rural road projects at the district level. In order to examine these issues, four districts—Baglung, Dhading, Kabhre, and Ilam — were selected for case studies (Map 1). At the project level, the economic use of rural roads and their impact on sustainable rural development were examined.



