



e-discussion summary

## Improving Local Governance in the Hindu Kush-Himalayan Region Challenges and Good Practices

### E-discussion, June-July 2010

An e-discussion on 'Improving Local Governance in the Hindu Kush-Himalayan Region: Challenges and Good Practices' ran from 14 June to 5 July 2010, attracting 65 registered participants from 37 organisations in 10 countries, with a diverse range of academic and professional backgrounds in international development. The aim of the discussion was to improve understanding of the root causes of local governance issues, and to collect examples of good governance practices, effective approaches, and lessons learned for improving local governance in the Hindu Kush-Himalayan region (which extends across parts of Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, China, India, Myanmar, Nepal, and Pakistan). This information sheet presents a summary of the participants' opinions and field experience in identifying governance issues, challenges, and good practices in mountain and hill regions.

**Moderators:** Noorin Nazari and Naniram Subedi, governance specialists, with technical support from Tek Jung Mahat

**Summaries:** Prepared by Noorin Nazari

**Discussants:** The names of the participants are listed at <http://www.icimod.org/?page=1141> together with a detailed summary of the discussion and some brief success stories.

Consensus is growing on the meaning of governance in the development context. "Governance can be seen as the exercise of economic, political, and administrative authority to manage a country's affairs at all levels. It comprises the mechanisms, processes and institutions through which citizens and groups articulate their interests, exercise their legal rights, meet their obligations, and mediate their differences," (UNDP Policy Document 2007). The contemporary practice of governance includes a wide range of stakeholders from government institutions to civil society organisations, customary institutions, and communities. Good governance requires collaboration among all stakeholders so that they complement each other and fulfill their potential. It ensures that stakeholders are efficient, responsive, accountable, and equitable – qualities that are guaranteed through participatory, inclusive, and transparent mechanisms aimed at building communication and collaboration linkages among stakeholders with and without common interests.



**A community and local government gathering hosted by The Mountain Institute-India aimed at identifying root causes of illegal trade of wild life in Sikkim and Darjeeling**

The participants affirmed that the debate on local governance issues and good practices is important for the people of the Hindu Kush-Himalayan region, who face numerous environmental challenges such as land degradation, deforestation, loss of biodiversity, scarcity of firewood, and drought. These challenges are exacerbated by poor governance practices at all levels; nevertheless mountain communities show resilience in tackling the problems at local level. Their rich traditional knowledge and skills have contributed to their ability to adapt and survive in harsh physical and political environments. Their traditional community institutions – although not always democratic and often excluding women and other minority socioeconomic groups – have provided reliable management systems at times when government services were non-existent or inefficient.

### **The root causes of poor local governance practices**

Participants identified the following issues and challenges as hindering the employment of good governance practices at local level.

#### **Centralisation of power and resources creates problems at local level**

Decentralisation from the centre to the periphery is a prerequisite for good local governance. The UNDP's Fifth Global Forum on Reinventing Government (2003, Mexico) declared that "improving governance is a function of decentralization and citizen participation. Decentralization of the administrative, financial and political aspects of government is critical to the process of reform." Centralised systems and policies can create a division between local government bodies and communities when local government bodies

- lack access to the sources of power so that their credibility and efficiency are questioned by communities and non-government organisations;

- lack sufficient resources and decision-making power to be efficient and effective; and
- must implement decisions made at the centre that do not reflect the needs and interests of communities, so that people may not cooperate in the implementation process.

#### **Communication gaps between formal and customary institutions leave both sides incomplete**

Both formal and informal institutions have strengths and limitations. For example, customary institutions provide local traditional technical knowledge and social influence, but they may need to become more equitable by incorporating the voices of minorities and marginalised segments of society, in particular women. Similarly, formal government institutions have a high degree of legitimacy and access to resources and legal and law enforcement bodies, but would benefit from increased accountability and transparency measures, among others. Civil society organisations often deliver services effectively in areas such as community mobilisation and technology innovation, but could improve their efficacy by bridging the coordination gap among stakeholders with conflicting interests. A mechanism is needed to facilitate communication and support development of a learning and sharing environment among various stakeholders.

#### **Gaps and overlaps in responsibility lead to inefficiency**

In any natural resource management scheme, a wide number of stakeholders work together within and across organisations. However, in some countries in the Hindu Kush-Himalayas there is no simple administrative body responsible for specific types of natural resources. Thus leads to both overlaps and gaps in the responsibilities of stakeholders, particularly in government agencies, with poor communication, lack of a systematic approach to division of labour, and ineffective bottom-up feedback from citizens. Success depends on how well the roles are defined and how aware members are of their own role and the roles of others.

"Mustang District in Nepal has many government institutions, but village committees still resolve most of the social problems in the village. One police inspector in Lo Monthang told me that villagers barely register any social problems at their office, as they prefer the relatively more efficient and effective decision-making system of the village committee."

Contributor from Nepal

## Organisations are not gender-sensitive and do not meet the specific needs of women

The World Conference on Women held in 1995 declared that “Eradication of poverty based on sustained economic growth, social development, environmental protection, and social justice requires the involvement of women in economic and social development, equal opportunities, and the full and equal participation of women and men as agents and beneficiaries of people-centred sustainable development.” Women show a great sense of responsibility for, and often directly manage, natural resources, but their different priorities and management approach remains unacknowledged. For example, a survey by the Self Employed Women’s Association (SEWA) in 30 villages in Uttarakhand, India, found that men prioritised electricity and roads (70 to 80%), whereas women prioritised schools, hospitals, and natural resource management (almost 90%). Often the needs of women are not met even when they are given some decision-making role because the role is often symbolic.

## There is little incentive to build the capacity of local government bodies

The front-line service delivery officials who implement most government programmes interact directly with people and know about what works and what does not at local level.

During SEWA’s work related to building capacity of women panchayat raj functionaries in Uttarakhand, I went to visit the pradhan. A woman standing outside the pradhan’s house guided me inside and introduced me to a man she called the pradhan. The man said that he was the ‘pradhan pati’ and that the woman was his wife and the elected pradhan! He said that I could discuss all matters with him, while he directed his wife (the actual pradhan) to get water and tea for me!!!

Contributor from India

However, central governments generally provide only limited investment to build their capacity, and opportunities for civil society organisations to exchange knowledge and information with these officials are often limited.

## Poor sense of responsibility and initiation among local stakeholders at all levels

Traditionally, responsibility lies with decision makers at higher levels in the hierarchy; thus government officials have the



The Garos community in Chandigre of the West Garo Hills in Meghalaya, NE India, discussing the impacts of climate change and weather variability, and the need for institutional support for adaptation

prime responsibility at times of crises and failures. In real life, elected officials may forget promises of accountability and transparency made during elections. Equally, representatives of customary institutions may align with government officials and undermine the real community interests. Communities may also not practise their rights, particularly when there is no external stimulus to mobilise. Article 2 of The Universal Declaration of Rights and Responsibilities holds accountable not only government bodies, civil society organisations, and the private sector, but also communities and individuals, for all practices that lead to good governance.

## Good practices and effective approaches

The discussants presented several examples of good practices and effective approaches.

- In Syangja district of Nepal, villagers collectively identified the poorest households to benefit from certain development schemes, and the programmes were highly successful.
- In India, the Apple Project concentrated on developing the capacity of farmers, and removing the intermediaries who controlled the process from credit supply for farm inputs to marketing of produce.
- In Langtang National Park of Nepal, a strong sense of community and effective community mobilisation helped one village’s inhabitants overcome water scarcity.
- In Mustang, Nepal, there is a customary system of water governance that is effective and transparent that successfully addresses the water needs of 28 village households.
- In Jomsom, in Mustang district, Nepal, many formal organisations take suggestions from the Mother Groups before making major decisions. Women are active in the executive roles, the members are from all households of a village, and they have an annual election for the chairperson and other executive members.



Community women in Bamyan, Afghanistan, casting their ballots to elect a representative to the National Solidarity Program – an Afghan government-led community development initiative



Gaukhureswor Community Forestry Group of Dhulikhel, Nepal, describing the involvement of community members in managing the forest, their objectives, and how benefits are shared.

## Lessons for improving local governance

Several lessons for improving local governance were identified in the discussions.

**Promoting shifts in power dynamics** is a gradual process. It is essential to consider the broader political and historical context, time factors, and societal climate. The origins of customary institutions should be examined before incorporating them into decision-making processes, as not all are equitable or gender sensitive. It is important to focus on changing attitudes at all levels of society, particularly in rural areas; having quotas for women's representation is not sufficient.

**Empowerment of a community** beyond economic gain requires an enterprise to become more transparent, easier for everyone to understand, and more participatory. Identifying the poorest households for specific benefits is best done by local people rather than focusing only on government or civil society organisations. There is a trade-off between equity and efficiency. Equity measures require additional resources, but at the same time ensure successful outcomes.

A community and local government gathering hosted by The Mountain Institute – India aimed at identifying root causes of illegal trade of wild life in Sikkim and Darjeeling



**Legislation approaches** that mandates participatory approaches can ensure that current development programmes are designed so that their accompanying guidelines and operational procedures facilitate inclusiveness and gender sensitivity. There is a need for foreign aid to formulate ways for decentralisation and local governance to be more accountable and transparent.

**Institutional networking** has become the key tool for bringing customary institutions and their issues to the fore in the past decade, for example FECOFUN in Nepal.

**Leadership building** develops and builds the capacity of potential leaders within customary institutions and local women's clubs. These leaders may eventually be elected to local governance bodies and have a good influence.

**Capacity building** packages sensitise and motivate development actors to support the participatory planning cycle.

**Multi-stakeholder approaches** make development planning more inclusive and consultative in order to integrate and articulate the needs of a wide range of development actors. In the design of projects and programmes, decision-making power should be given to stakeholders, including communities, civil society organisations, politicians, bureaucrats, and donors. If these stakeholders feel ownership, the intervention is more likely to succeed.

## For further information please contact

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