

Community roads: Transport case study

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Background and the need



Over 69,000 kilometres of roads in Sri Lanka are termed as "unclassified roads." These are mostly rural access roads that help rural women, men and children reach essential service centres such as hospitals, schools and banks or markets. The local government authorities that are closest to the village communities are the Pradeshiya Sabhas (PSS) which do not have sufficient funds to cover all construction, rehabilitation and maintenance work that come under their remit. Furthermore, the bureaucracy and the long-practiced work patterns of government institutions lessons scope of innovative and alternative methods to be used in providing services for the communities.

A marked absence is the non-involvement of communities in the plans to develop and maintain the roads they frequently use. This can be regarded as paradoxical in the light of the low resources available to the local government offices and the age-old practice among the communities of sharing labour for community work. Where there are no roads or where paths to a village are a mere dirt track, the community of that village would organise a voluntary labour campaign popularly known in Sri Lanka as a "Shramadana".

Generally set on a public holiday, women and men of the village would, together, pave the pathway to the village. But the benefits of these efforts do not last long because the roads are not made to meet technological standards. All it takes is one or two heavy rainfalls to wash the road away.

The project

The Village Road Development Project of ITDG South Asia is promoting a novel approach to rural road construction, maintenance and management with community participation. The approach builds up on the strengths of the rural isolated communities and their local government institutions to jointly maintain the village access roads in a satisfactory condition.

The most important feature of this approach is placing the community in control of the building, maintenance and management of work and developing their capacities to effectively do these tasks. In doing so, two aspects are given prominence i.e. providing the community with the relevant technical skills and familiarising them with organised labour sharing systems to ensure progress of work.

Communities' control of the technologies used to build and maintain the roads is ensured through several steps. One is the introduction of low cost equipment and tools. Most of these substitute the more expensive and relatively complicated equipment that is used by engineers. Use of simplified equipment helps easy understanding of the technologies involved and thereby encourages people, especially women, to be actively involved in the technical aspects. It is common for people with less exposure to hard technologies to be reluctant to use technical equipment. This is the case with most women in rural areas because due to traditional and cultural influences they work less with "machines" and have less confidence about their technical capability. However, in the village road development pilot project in Malberigama over 80% of the participants are women. Three of the 8 village technicians trained for the first two pilot sites are women. One is now working in a supervisory capacity in another site.

Another important feature that gives community a better control over the technology is the use of equipment and tools that are less heavy, paving way for women and senior members of a community to be part of the team that rebuilds the road to the village. Each pilot project starts with a 3 to 5 day technical programme and technical training continues throughout the construction period.

The second aspect is organising systematic community participation. Unlike in Sharamadana work, the community is encouraged and assisted to learn and practice methodical systems to ensure that the time and efforts of the people are not wasted. This is achieved through forming and strengthening a village development society formed by community and helping them to set up systems, work rosters, payment schedules etc., in ways that are most appropriate to that particular community. With community mobilisation, over 80 % of a community generally become members of such a society. Village technicians are selected through these societies. Planning meetings are held in the villages and all the key decisions related to the project, be they technical matters, payment issues or work schedules, are discussed and decided here. ITDG helps the community by providing all related information and creating space for the communities to make informed choices.

The strongest feature in terms of sustainability of the project is the close ties established between the community and the local government authority that is directly responsible for the roads of that area. From the inception of the project, the community is helped to forge links with their local government authority (PS). All key steps of the construction work are informed to the PS, especially the chairman and the Technical Officer of the PS, and they are part of the project progress monitoring team meetings. This ensures examination of issues from different aspects as well as strengthening bonds between the PS and the communities, who would otherwise be neglected in rural infrastructure planning. The close interaction with the PS also helps the community to access support such as legal assistance for land acquisition and, access of construction material such as cylinders for culverts. The key aim of the project is to help PSs realize the potential of a

community to share the responsibility of road construction and maintenance, if supported appropriately.

The Village Road Development Project in Sri Lanka of ITDG South Asia began work in 1998 with two village based technical training programmes carried out at the first two pilot sites in Malberigama and Kohugoda. The week long training programmes, focusing four village technicians from each village but to which 25 to 75 members of the two villages also participated, were conducted by 2 Nepalese consultants who were trained at the Kisi Training Centre, Kenya Institute of Highways and Building Technology on labour based road construction methods. On successful completion of these 2 pilot sites, the project was ready for replication. Requests for similar projects came from local government authorities soon afterwards and work on two more pilot sites began in 2000. In addition, the extension road to one of the earlier pilot sites was assisted by a provincial state organisation. At this stage, it was necessary to further strengthen ITDG South Asia's capacity to promote this technology and the project engineer was trained at the Kisi Training Centre, which works in collaboration ILO ASIST. A deeper understanding of the technical and engineering aspects is necessary to maintain a dialogue with the more conventional thinking technical and engineering staff of GO and NGOs to increase the acceptability of this approach in development planning.

The next step of the project is to train Technical Officers of the local government institutions and NGOs in this approach and with their support promote wider replication of the community based road construction approach by local government authorities.

Shramadanas (Free donation of Labour) are carried out for all types of community development work. However, this method is not a long term viable and a sustainable method. All rural roads are under the purview of Pradeshiya Sabhas (Lowest level of local government). Therefore, the community groups do not have the full responsibility of managing the affairs and a sense of ownership. This approach tries to get the communities to have the road management responsibilities shared with the Pradeshiya Sabha.

Impacts

In order to get the sense of ownership, the project has demonstrated that the communities can manage the technology themselves and the benefits clearly seen as a result of collective efforts. The motorised traffic inflow to the villages has had many positive impacts on their lives. The transport costs for their produce have been reduced and the profit margins increased. The sick could be transported to hospitals quickly by motorised transport and the land values have gone up.

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