

## Questions for Reflection

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Words of caution are appropriate when considering decentralised energy planning and management. Important questions are discussed below to indicate some of the constraints to be overcome. These are challenges that will have to be confronted with tact and innovative activities if decentralised energy planning and management are to achieve success.

**Is There the Necessary Political Will?** Despite the revival of interest in decentralisation within the Region, this question concerning political will for implementation remains unanswered. Enactment of the Decentralisation Act in Nepal, and administrative support for district planning mechanisms in India, are encouraging signs and important opportunities. Are these steps alone sufficient to ensure that those who have traditionally been in power will be willing to relinquish that power? Can decentralisation succeed while hierarchical structures remain intact within the current sociocultural systems, administrative establishments, and research and development frameworks? Why should the privileged rural elite allow the underprivileged to have a say? What is the possibility that the centralised administrative structure would devolve authority to district officers and extension agents? What are the incentives for researchers, scientists, and technologists to become people - oriented?

There cannot be any clear-cut answers to the above questions. The challenge is to take the opportunities available and try them out as much as possible. If, in due course, constraints can be identified on a case-by-case basis and possible strategies can be formulated by reflecting on how the constraints can be removed, these would be positive steps in the right direction. A fundamental reorientation in approach cannot take place unless all parties affected by the new strategies have something to gain. How can a positive-sum process evolve during the course of interactions? This is clearly an area in which action research can yield important results.

**What Is So Important About the Role of Energy?** The interpretation of energy's role in rural development is subject to much confusion. The concern for energy had its origin in the industrialised countries as a consequence of oil price increases in the 1970's and was later exported to developing countries in the context of the fuelwood crisis and deforestation. The concern therefore carries with it a certain enigma that conveys conservation of commercial energy and substitution by alternative forms of energy. The argument is that these concepts have limited significance in such areas as the Hindu Kush-Himalaya Region where a majority of the population is struggling for survival. Why should energy planning be given high priority when there are pressing problems in meeting such basic requirements as food, shelter, and employment?

The above question implies that if energy is to gain recognition, it is important to advocate its linkages with ongoing development activities. These linkages are not necessarily clearly understood by the villagers or the sectoral planners. The broader concept of energy as expressed in this paper has to be communicated satisfactorily if implementation of energy planning is to gain momentum.

A small but important point has to be noted here concerning inherent difficulties with the terms for energy in local languages. Words such as *shakti*, *urja*, *indhan*, and others presently being used to convey the meaning of energy are either too limiting, or unintelligible in everyday conversation. How can these terms be broadened to indicate linkages with rural development? Although this etymological problem may sound minor, there are associated repercussions which deserve serious attention.

From the administrative standpoint, the constraint is that current district development plans do not have a separate budget item for energy as in the case of conventionally recognised sectors such as agriculture, cottage industries, irrigation, drinking water, health, and education. District energy planning and management have, therefore, a hollow ring if seen from the sectoral planners' point of view. How can this be corrected? I have argued in this paper that energy links exist with almost all sectors. From a practical standpoint, can an innovative design be introduced to integrate the energy components in these sectors for strengthening ongoing sectoral efforts? This issue has to be resolved if decentralised energy planning and management are to gain validity.

**Renewable or Nonrenewable Sources of Energy?** Energy planning for rural areas tends to become preoccupied with renewable sources of energy. Nonrenewable sources are explicitly excluded because they are imported, and hence, a drain on the economy. To the extent that renewable sources are underutilised and can be economically exploited with the available knowhow for intended end uses, the emphasis is understandable. From the perspective of the mountain region, the attention given to development of small hydro -



power plants, water mills, afforestation, and improved stoves is largely appropriate. Total exclusion of nonrenewable sources on the strength of this argument alone is not justifiable. If, for example, they can be proven to be economically viable, if their importation is feasible on a sustained basis because of a large profit margin, and if they can be acquired readily without having to wait for a long time until renewable sources are developed, should the nonrenewable option be ignored? The issue deserves a more open-ended evaluation.

**How Can Grass Roots Participation Be Effective?** Decentralisation schemes are currently administered with the intent of devolving decision-making authority to the district, block, or county level for planning and policy making. Administrative convenience is evident since government officers are stationed here and elected representatives from different parts of the district, block, or county gather for meetings of various kinds. It is assumed that elected representatives will be able to express the needs and priorities of the people in their respective constituencies and that government officers will be able to respond to these needs and priorities in an efficient manner. Is this arrangement effective in transmitting the benefits of decentralised activities to small communities and in mobilising the participation of community residents?

Undoubtedly, the role of the district administrative centre is important for coordination with national policy making and planning agencies, for intervillage cooperation on various activities, and for technical support and supervision as required. It is also important to recognise that key actions have to take place in villages by fostering mutual cooperation among villagers. The success of decentralisation is dependent on how mobilisation can be effective for such action. What is the mechanism to ensure such mobilisation?

Conceptually, the multilevel spatial planning approach as explained in this paper provides the necessary framework for different types of action from the village level to that of national agencies. The difficulties that are likely to be faced in implementing the concept are dependent on the extent of commitment and flexibility among those who play the catalytic role in decentralisation. Various difficulties will crop up during the course of implementation. The point to bear in mind is that a monitoring and evaluation system has to be in operation to ensure flexibility to overcome obstructions and fulfill decentralisation objectives.