

Chapter Seven

Politics of Development — Partners and Assistance

Conflict with the Local NGO Sahamati

In 2061 BS (2004/05), Sahamati, a Nawalparasi-based NGO, began to work with MMBKSS and other organisations representing the interests of fishing communities. It attempted to contribute to capacity building and the institutional development of existing local-level organisations. In Rajahar VDC, the NGO organised a workshop on networking with the objective of expanding the scope of the organisation. MMBKSS activists accepted the NGO's proposal believing that it would support their ongoing struggle and that they would benefit financially. However, tensions soon surfaced. Their differences erupted after the initiation of a project by the NGO involving the MMBKSS without consulting them. The president of MMBKSS stated:

"We wrote a formal letter to the NGO saying that we object to becoming a client of an NGO. We are willing to work as equal partners. The NGO did not consult us when applying for external funding, signing the agreement, or starting the project."

The NGO then reportedly challenged the activists in a discussion saying: *"You cannot run your organisation on your own. You people do not know anything"*. The NGO proposed to manage and control project funds and release activity specific funds to MMBKSS. The activists did not agree to this and said that they did not want to be treated as clients and would not work under their authority.

MMBKSS then addressed the donors that funded the NGO by expressing their concern in a formal letter and questioning the rationale behind funding an NGO without assessing the ground realities and understanding the perspectives of the actual right holders. Bote-Majhi activists pointed out that no representatives of the donor had visited them prior to finalisation of the project agreement. A joint meeting among MMBKSS, Sahamati, CDO, and the donors (Care Nepal and Action Aid Nepal) addressed the conflict. As Care Nepal had already released the funding, as per the agreement, the project was stalled for a while. Then Sahamati declared their intent to form a community-based organisation of indigenous fishing communities, with a promise to spend already released funding. Majhi Utthan Kendra was established, even though MMBKSS was already in existence.

Before the formation of the new community-based organisation of indigenous fishing communities, the NGO organised several programmes including advocacy training, a press conference, and citizenship camps, and appointed one person from Bote-Majhi community as a community motivator. MMBKSS claims that the total amount funded by Care Nepal was NRs 1 million. Out of this, only NRs 78,000 was allotted for campaigns with MMBKSS. Activists also claim that the practice of distributing allowances to participants during the programmes, although unhealthy in the long

term, had temporarily attracted local communities. One of the employees of the NGO claimed that the communities would be liberated in ten years. However, in reality, when the project term ran out, the programmes initiated by the NGO struggled for sustenance. MMBKSS activists saw that NGO staff only worked during the duration of the project and did not show up after the formal date was over. Majhi Uttan Kendra became defunct. The secretary of the organisation migrated to India. The other employees gave up their affiliation with the organisation and the NGO. One member, Hom Bahadur Musahar, left the organisation and joined MMBKSS. *"Sahamati divided our unified organisation,"* he regrets in distress.

Donors and NGOs try to set up organisations as projects. In this particular case, the effort was not successful. It might have been more useful to explore ways to support existing spontaneous, movement-based, community organisations after assessing their needs and after being very careful not to make undemocratic decisions, or to create dependence in any way.

Foreign Financial Assistance

Globalisation came to the Bote-Majhi through subtle channels and in the form of international NGOs. Their struggles and lives have been caught up with the politics and approaches of the bigger players in the development business.

The first (tripartite) agreement between Oxfam, Action Aid Nepal, and CDO was for three years (1996/97–1998/99). The project was envisioned as a learning experience. This enabled the inflow of foreign funding for the empowerment of indigenous fishing communities in Nawalparasi and to improve their livelihood. MMBKSS was for the first time exposed to foreign funding to assist their struggle. The allocated amount of NRs 800,000 was earmarked for building the institutional capacity of MMBKSS and channelled through the budget allocated to CDO. Although the technical financial responsibility was with CDO, democratic procedures determined the relationship because MMBKSS had been a partner organisation of CDO since 1998/99.

In the course of the cooperation, it was realised that an improvement in the fishing communities' entitlements could only be made possible through the buffer zone user committees, VDCs, and community forests. It also became clear that broader alliances had to be forged to tackle issues that lay beyond the local level, such as structural issues, and the root causes of the livelihood crisis. Oxfam showed reluctance to broaden the scope of the project beyond the locality itself. Oxfam's concern was based on its understanding of leadership at the micro-level of organising protests by the very poor. However, there was a danger that the leadership would slide back to the relatively dominant stakeholders in society and threaten the purpose of the programme. Oxfam's observation was that CDO was involved in issues beyond the mandate of the project and the benefits of the project were not directly reaching poor indigenous fishing communities. Action Aid, on the other hand, was pushing an agenda of initiating income generating activities along with social campaigns.

In the final review of the project, the donor's comment was that MMBKSS could not develop managerial skills and CDO lacked adequate representation of women and Janajatis (indigenous people) in its organisational set-up. Despite these reservations,

continuation of the project was recommended. MMBKSS continued to work in Nawalparasi and CDO worked with fishing communities in Chitwan. Oxfam continued as the sole donor. However, later, Oxfam committed only to a short-term project of six months.

During these six months fundamental differences arose between Oxfam and CDO regarding strategies and approach. Oxfam believed that an intervention should yield instant results and, therefore, the approach should focus on the direct empowerment of the social group targeted. CDO's understanding, arising from years of engagement, mobilisation, and organisational interventions, was that instant gratification is unrealistic.