PEOPLE-CENTERED DEVELOPMENT IN NEPAL : An Innovative Approach

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1. Introduction

The concept of development, in recent years, has gained much prominence as a subject of study and reflection. It is now well accepted that development obviously is a multi-dimensional effort. It also involves a multi-faceted approach in explaining the processes of economic development and social change. More importantly, development, instead of being a growth of few parts, is a broader process of social evolution encompassing all aspects of human life. This would also imply that it draws attention to the process of change which is purposive and positive as a result to which happiness of both people and their society is ensured.

Inspite of this well-deserved status, the parameters of development are so intricate that they cannot be defined to universal satisfaction. Anthropological studies unanimously suggest that people representing different social, cultural and ecological realities always have differing perceptions of what is desirable to them. This, in turn, implies that meaning of development varies across societies, cultures and ecological settings. Thus, this multi-faceted term "development", like an abstract art, gives different visions to different people. This idea is rooted in the very fact that human societies throughout the world represent diversities in terms of their culture, societies, needs and concerns. It is against the background of this very context that the concept of people-centered development enters the scene of anthropological discourse and deliberation.

(a) Significance and Relevance of the Present Study

The concept of people-centered development occupies a central place in the present study. The basic premise for the people-

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centered approach entails that if development is meant to fulfil people's needs and aspirations, it cannot be imposed from "above" and transplanted from outside, which have often far- reaching counter-productive consequences on the harmonious functioning of the small-scale societies. Such an attempt would be similar of fixing alien key in our lock having exactly a reverse profile. It does not work at all.

The concept of people-centered development leads us to the profound realization the development must be an indigenous process. The concept of indigenous development *per se* envisages a perspective in which people living in a specific social, cultural, economic and ecological setting define their own concept of development definition of relevance and correspond indigenous circumstances (Berreman 1994 : 6). Above all, it should be indigenously inspired, selected, guided and evaluated. This means development policies and practices must identify, nurture and sustain indigenous potential, means and resources to express diversity and plurality of social values, culture, institutions and identities of each nation and community (Wangoola 1993: 3). Accordingly, for the purpose of this study, people-centered development is primarily defined as a culture-relative, location specific, ecologically conditioned and social setting ingrained concept.

Particularly, over the last few years, people-centered development has been quite useful in understanding the broader processes of change and development because among other things, it focuses on the challenges of equitable and sustainable development (Korten 1992:5). On the other hand, it also stresses pragmatism, flexibility, and the contextuality for innovative solutions to the process of social change (Brohman 1996: 329).

In recent decade, it has been widely realized that the problem of development is basically social, cultural and human in nature and not merely technological or economic. Merits of technological change is one aspect but the more crucial aspect is how people perceive it and how close it is to their needs, problems and priorities. In reality, development through strong techno-economic base does not necessarily mean a search for best solutions for the enhancement of overall progress of the community. It rather entails contact with the world of real people and rediscovery of their needs, aspirations, priorities and potentials. Mathur (1990 : VI) attempts to put the concept of people-centered development within the perspective of anthropology as he points out, "the people-centered development pre-supposes first-hand knowledge of the people concerned". This implies

that development entails contact with the real world of people, rediscovery of their ways of life, incursion into their vision of society and nurturing their potential to overcome problem-situations so that their intended goals are truly achieved. Above all, people-centered development approach is pragmatic and innovative

(b)   The Debate

A recent debate on development seems to be moving around two dominant development paradigmatic orientations. The first view holds that villagers are poor, ignorant and incapable of handling problem-situations which they face in their day-to-day life. Hence, they must be convinced, motivated, educated, manipulated and if the need arises then intervened through coercion. In the present study, this is referred as paternalistic, mechanistic and deterministic approach to development intervention. The conventional theories of techno-economic growth are trying to maintain this approach.

The second view presumes that villagers know a great deal about the causes and consequences of what they do in their every day life. People are also capable to handle problem-situations by making optimum use of cultural, social and human resources available within their village communities. In this perspective, it is maintained that villagers should be left alone to undertake their development with no outside interference or stimuli. This is referred as a liberal or populist approach to local level development intervention in the present study.

The fundamental question raised in this study is that both these above mentioned approaches are unable to address the complex social, cultural and economic problems faced by the people especially at the village level. Based on these insights, it has been realized that there is a need to develop an alternative innovative model which concentrates on the integration of "outside" scientific know-how, resources and other forms of assistance with the "inside" culture, knowledge system, resources and other empirical methods of the villagers. According to Barnett, an innovation is "any thought, behaviour, or thing that is new because it is qualitatively different from existing forms" (1953: 7). To follow Barnett's view, its newness is rooted in the old, in the sense of recognizing that which already exists and making it compatible with the new one to effect a more rational and appropriate change. Indeed, the term "Innovative Development" in the context of the present study is understood as a process of incorporation of "new" into the existing one and also involves a framework to recognize or modify it to address the changed

circumstances of the present. This innovative model of development, allows technological involvement from both directions, "inside" as well as "outside". It is believed that such an approach exerts a great potential to ameliorate inner inclusiveness of outside know-how, support and assistance in more appropriate ways for the solution of the local level development problems.

2.   Aims and Scope

In the South Asian region, Nepal provides a typically "hard case" of development in several ways. Nepal's development problems have many sides. The most visible and posing problems faced by the country are: rapid population growth, widespread poverty, excessive depletion of both natural and cultural resources, slow planning process and knotty issues related to the upliftment of the quality of life of the rural poor. It is a stark reality that the majority of the people who live in the rural areas of Nepal are marginalized, vulnerable, weak and powerless.

In order to overcome these pressing problems, Nepalese planners and policy makers have tried many development models most of which have been borrowed from the successful spread effects of western countries. Their origin have been embodies in different historical realities, different socio-cultural contexts and different sources of knowledge as well. Not surprisingly, the irony is that the models which work successfully elsewhere have failed to address Nepal's complex social, cultural, economic and ecological problems.

Of these many problems faced by the Himalayan Kingdom of Nepal, reports on the frequent failure of development policies, programmes and projects are the most critical phenomena. Hence, the challenges on the rural development front seem most daunting and enduring. Under the present circumstances, the need for a better understanding of development programmes and projects under implementation, specially at the grassroots level, prompted the selection of this particular research work. Against this background, the present study aims to examine the *modus operandi* of the programmes and projects in operation, the crucial bottlenecks in their successful implementation and the parameters of planning framework required to support innovative development for the rural areas in Nepal in the emergent future. In order to address the above mentioned challenges and to provide thereby a policy context for innovative development planning, this study sets the following objectives :

(a)   to examine in detail the processes and problems of people-centered development in rural area from the point of view of local people; essence of structure of their society and the inner logic of their culture, institutions and values;

(b)   to assess the potential role of underlying socio-cultural forces and variables chiefly responsible for making the development programmes and projects unsuccessful or partially successful or successful primarily the implemented in the village communities in Nepal;

(c)   to search for an appropriate *modus operandi* to elaborate and identify new people-centered policies and strategies for rational management of rural development planning in Nepal and

(d)   to provide insights and ideas for academicians, development planners and practitioners to generate and fertilize knowledge concerning potential direction for innovative people-centered development policies in Nepal.

3.   Area and People

The intensive fieldwork on which the present study is based was conducted from September 1995 to November 1996 in the two Village Development Committees, namely, Mehelkuna and Sahare of Surkhet district, Mid-western Development Region, Nepal.

According to the recent results of Village Development Committee level Census Profile 1997, the study area contained 2976 households comprising 16072 people of which 8018 were males and 8054 females. The study area is inhabited by various caste/ethnic groups: Brahmin, Thakuris, Chhetris, Magars, Botes, Rajis; and occupational groups: Kumals, Kamis, Sunars, Damais, Sarkis and Badis, each occupying a significant position in the hierarchy of the Hindu caste system. At the village level, a sense of human relationship through the idiom of caste hierarchy is specially pronounced.

4.   Research Design and Methodology

Research design selected for the present study adheres to the "grounded theory" approach which is used mainly in collecting first-hand qualitative data directly from the field level. However, in order to understand holistic and valid socio-cultural realities prevailing in these two VDCs a "multi-instrument" research approach accompanied with a "multi-kit of tools" was selected for the present study.

The whole field work endeavour was mostly guided by the spirit of "listening to" and "learning from" the villagers of the study area. It may be plausible to argue that the ethnographic approach provided the researcher an opportunity to observe a holistic and valid picture of the community life in Mehelkuna and Sahare. As such the ethnographic approach, like a good map, provided a quick and realistic orientation of the physical, cultural and social terrain to the study area with which the researcher was not familiar previously.

5.   Main Findings

As discussed in the present study, three types of development programmes and projects are going on simultaneously in the village communities of Mehelkuna and Sahare. These include :

(a)   Development programmes and projects induced by the government and non-government agencies and organizations from "above" and "outside";

(b)   Development programmes and projects initiated and implemented by the people themselves in their own village communities; and

(c)   Development programmes and projects run jointly with a spirit of mutual partnership between development agencies and the villagers.

For the purpose of the present study, all these development programmes and projects have been classified into three broad categories : unsuccessful, partially successful and successful. The criteria of this classification is based on the varying degree of success which they have achieved in the area of enhancing sustainability, developing a sense of program ownership among the beneficiaries, helping to develop people's own community based organizations, assisting people to meet some of their basic felt needs, even if indirectly; and the degree of their involvement in the decision making processes.

5.1.   Characteristics of Unsuccessful Development Programme and Projects

Drawing evidences from the empirical case studies, the findings have provided profound understanding that the approach of mechanistic intervention seems too rigid and narrow to address the complex problem-situations faced by the people of the study area As a consequence, many externally induced programmes and projects in the

study area were rejected or at best evoked lukewarm responses on the part of the villagers The reasons have been identified as follows :

(a)   The externally induced programmes of intervention such as Small Farmers Development Project, Production Credit for the Rural Women, Maintada Irrigation Canal Construction Project, Mehelkuna and Sahare Drinking Water Supply Projects, Government Controlled Rural Rehabilitation Project, Agriculture Extension Service, Livestock Health Development Programme, despite heavy investments, good intention and technological perfections, failed to exert any influence on the behaviour, perception, cognition and attitude of the villagers. The weak reception of these programmes and projects can mainly be attributed to the lack of understanding of real life of villagers by planners and programme implementors. Further, policies and plans conceived at the central and district levels rather than the village level; too rigid targets set from outside without prior consultation with the concerned beneficiaries; emphasis on the outcomes of intervention rather than an innovative process; transfer of technology taking place from the hands of experts to the innocent villagers; lack of co-ordination among development agencies and finally, people's lack of conviction in the relevance of programmes and projects for their lives and concerns.

Findings of the case studies indicate that in all these above mentioned programmes and projects, neither socio-cultural variables were taken into consideration in the planning stage nor were the people consulted for their view points during their implementation. From the case studies, it is revealed that these projects were only passed through the technological and administrative tests of the Line Agencies. However, efforts to pass through socio-cultural tests were not substantially taken into account to make these programmes and projects suit the local contexts and conditions. The findings of this study, thus, agree with Cernea (1994) who argues that if social variables remain unaddressed or mishandled, than a project will remain unsustainable and fail, no matter which governmental and non governmental agency promotes it. The crucial point of this realization is that for the successes of a project, a competent social analysis based on the social and cultural inventory of the area becomes particularly essential. Similarly, findings of the present study support the view of Mathur (1990) who mentions that unless human dimension is given due consideration in all stages of planning and management, project howsoever otherwise perfect technologically, will not be able to produce the desired results.

Another crucial factor behind the failure of the externally induced programmes and projects is the lack of sense of their ownership among the villagers. Plans and decisions are made by central and district level leaders and projects are implemented only where they convinced of turning them into votes. This is clearly evident from the findings that there is a lack of motivation and understanding of local situations, immediate concerns and point of view of villagers on the part both central and district level planners and politicians. According to Bandhopadhaya (1991), the project will have greater chance of success if it is related to local perception of ownership and responsibility; decision making mechanisms and structure of turning decision into action.

(b)   One of the widely identified reasons for broad based resistance on the part of villagers to Primary Health Care Service and Deliver, Population Education and Family Planning Programmes, Basic and Primary Education Project, Pit Latrine and Improved Cooking Stoves Programmes was that all these programmes and projects were socio-culturally underdesigned. Each of the cases discussed suggested that the impact of all the externally induced programmes and projects on the ways of live of poor people have remained slow or minimal. Hence, it is conceded that for the success of a programme or project, due consideration to social, cultural and psychological variables, therefore, becomes very crucial. Hence, the findings of the present study strongly support the views of Dube (1958: 132) who argues that the acceptance of programme itself, or its constituent parts, is governed to a considerable extent by a variety of complex cultural factors, ranging from simple habits and accepted social practices to intricate patterns of belief, social structure, worldview, values and attitudes.

(c)   As evident from the findings, the most important missing element is the effective relationships between government institutions and people's organizations. These cases collectively suggest that all efforts through local level planned interventions, by and large, construed development as the replacement of existing culture, organization, values attitude, knowledge systems and genius traditions of the local people. For this reason, the new government created secular institutions, for example, Users Committees, Credit Group, Co-operative Committees, Management Committees, etc. in many ways in conflict with the secular institutions of the villagers such as *gaon sallaha, dharam panchayat, gaonle chhal phal, padima, pani pale, gaonle ban samiti, gaonle kulo samiti* and *dharam bhakari*. All these socio-economic institutions are primarily community based, culture-specific and decision are made by mutual discussion and agreement. Findings indicate that villagers do not consider the newly created government institutions as part of their own social organization in terms of their structure, function, meaning and processes. Thus, these were outrightly rejected by the villagers.

(d)   Findings of the present study highlight the fact that the joint family, kinship, caste and local action groups from a broader bases in making decisions and undertaking various sorts of development activities at the community level. Villagers realize the importance of these social and cultural institutions in the course of solving their problems more effectively. But the findings of the present study point out that the present practice of monolithic intervention have produced several grave consequences such as : breaking down of these indigenous institutions into bits and pieces and creating a cultural dustbowl at the grassroots level, emergence of a culture of unreasonable silence especially among the poorer sections of the societies, destruction of polytechniques of local artisans by the megatechniques of engineers, the creation of a negative social image of people towards development and emergence of an environment of mistrust between general public, local leaders and planners. As a consequence, these village communities have gone astray and the poor have been pushed away further inch-by-inch from their own established ways of work and life.

Findings of this study suggest that deficiencies in decision-making, no due consideration given to cultural and human side of development, absence of effective institutional configuration, inappropriate intervention strategies, lack of co-ordination and integration, etc. indicate shortcomings of techno-economic-centered model of local level planned intervention in Nepal.

5.2.   Characteristics of Partially Successful Development Programmes and Projects

Findings of the case studies reveal that for all self-initiated programmes and projects, villagers show strong commitments for participating at every stages of decision and planning processes and their subsequent implementation. However, it was soon observed that villagers efforts for their self development has been sabotaged due to the following reasons :

(a)   Almost all people-initiated projects, despite availability of strong socio-cultural and institutional base within the community, suffer from a lack of scientific know-how and acute shortage of cash and construction materials such as cement, rods, pipes etc. Since most of the villagers are poor, they are willing to contribute their labour but not cash for construction projects.

Villagers hold the view that it is almost impossible to complete some projects such a Sahare-Thakleni Irrigation Canal, Apkholi Irrigation Canal, Mehelkuna-Maintada Irrigation Canal and Nange-Kopchi Irrigation Canal without external scientific know-how, technological support, construction materials and financial resources.

The Line Agencies did not seem anxious enough to help the people-initiated programmes and projects to run in proper tracks because they thought that it would provide them with an additional work-burden. It was observed that such a non-coperative attitude upheld by the Line Agencies have seriously damaged the spirit of self-development of the villagers, resulting into acute frustration among them.

(b)   It is also clearly evident from the findings that the built-in rigidity in existing rural development planning practices provides no room for learning from the people's initiative of

self-development already available at the local level. However, there is no official word yet to incorporate these projects into the regular planning activities of the concerned Line Agencies.

(c)   The communities in these two VDCs, which are at the receiving end of the plans, are composed of a mixture of people from different castes and ethnic groups, with varying hierarchy, power and unequitable access to available resources. Despite these above mentioned differences, it is discovered soon that people co-operate and work together in many development programmes that directly address the challenges of their pressing subsistence and other strong felt needs. In the village communities of Mehelkuna and Sahare, the programmes that fall under this category include Raniban Protection and Conservation Programme, Ajingare-Gaile and Hanuman Village Irrigation Canal Construction Projects, School Building Construction Programmes, Protection and Conservation of Village Pasturelands and Construction of Village Trails. These are the types of projects which have continued over several years with no assistance from outside development agencies. Thus, the findings of the present study go closer to Shrestha (1993: 142) who observes in the context of a mountain village of Nepal that people co-operate and work together to meet the constant challenges of survival and subsistence. According to him, this spirit of co-operation often overcomes the constraints imposed by the rigidities of an orthodox Hindu hierarchic village social structure.

In short, the above findings suggest that the call for "development by people" in policies and practices, for a an enduring development, is a serious call which requires deliberate efforts to recognize the centrality of what people are capable of doing themselves and what they need from outside and when, both in ideas and in the action, or practice.

5.3.   Characteristics of Successful Development Programmes and Projects

The village communities of Mehelkuna and Sahare are liberally associated with many more or less successful experiments in the direction of achieving programme and project success. The most successful development programmes and projects, as identified in the village communities of Mehelkuna and Sahare, include Raniban

Community Based Forest Protection and Conservation Programme, Nange-Kopchi Farmers' Managed Irrigation Project, Simalgaira Womens' Group Controlled Irrigation Project, Gokulkund Farmers Managed Irrigation Project, Chandra-Surya Environment Conservation and Village Sanitation Promotion Programme and Farmers' Group Based Secondary Crop Development Project. These are also the projects and programmes which provide the important data and information on how people create projects locally, how they make decisions, how they utilize their social stock of knowledge for the formulation and implementation of village based development programmes and projects, in what ways they organize both internal and external resources, what sort of strategies they follow while negotiating with development agencies, how they work collectively on programme and project execution activities and what is the pattern of sharing programme outcomes within a village community ? All these aspects have been discussed in detail in the thesis.

Following can be some of the identifiable characteristics of the most successful development programmes and projects.

(a)   Success of these programmes and projects resulted from the due consideration given by the development agencies to incorporate local conditions, contexts, concerns as well as social, cultural and human variables in designing projects and carrying out subsequent executing activities at the village level;

(b)   In fact, the most important reason for the success of these programmes and projects is that the local beneficiaries have been allowed to make decisions and organize themselves on the basis of culturally accepted manners and development agencies extended their support to peoples' decision on an equal footing;

(c)   Success of these projects was facilitated by the firm conviction which the Line Agencies carried with the local people regarding the possibility of developing partnership in development through the spirit of mutual control, mutual learning, joint action, negotiation, accommodation and consensus building and so on.

(d)   The case studies also disclose the fact that success in these projects was mainly due to the local people's enthusiasm to incorporate outside scientific know-how, support and assistance in their own social stock of knowledge,

technologies and other empirical methods with a goal in mind to solve the immediate project problems;

(e)   As regards designing and executing programmes and projects, the development agencies also facilitated important mechanisms for an active involvement of local beneficiaries in the entire program activities by transferring greater responsibilities to people's local institutions. This kind of flexible and decentralized operational procedures adopted by development agencies also enabled the poor villagers to respond creatively and effectively to improve programme performances;

In addition, the participatory nature of development strategies adopted by development agencies specially in programme design and implementation, efforts oriented to generate an interactive process of "learning by doing" involving development agencies extension workers and the villagers, identification of local interest and action groups, recognition and respect for people's spirit of self-help development and incorporation of these efforts into the line agencies' regular planning activities, are some of the decisive pre-requisites. When all these factors were moulded together in a single thread; they contributed enormously to the success of the development programmes and projects bringing them closer to the stated objectives.

Finally, it is evident that there are hundreds of big and small social, cultural, economic, political and religious institutions functioning for centuries in the village communities of Mehelkuna and Sahare. All these institutions aimed at managing, caring, sharing, harmonizing and conserving the scarce resources available within the boundaries of the village communities. In fact, these form the greatest resources available for planning authentic and genuine "people-centered" development models/designs for the rural areas of Nepal. It may be conceded that, if harnessed properly, solution of the present problems can also be found in the traditional systems of the local people.

6.   Concluding Remarks

In a nutshell, the present work is a modest attempt to initiate discussions and debates which acknowledge the fact that rural development policies, strategies and practices to be innovative need to be flexible and culturally sensitive to blend with needs, concerns and priorities of the local people. Hence, it is suggested that local values,

traditions and good old ways of the community are used constructively and not destroyed or discredited.

The present study contends that innovations projected for community level, cannot realize their full potential unless calibrated adequately and appropriately with the elements of culture, institutions, values, ethos and knowledge systems of the local people. It is discernible that the merits of intervention is one aspect, that other crucial aspect is how people perceive it and how close it is to their culture, institutions, needs, problems and priorities In this sense, it becomes reasonable to argue that innovations cannot yield desirable results unless socio-cultural dimensions of development and human elements involved in it, are taken seriously.

In the present study, the innovative programmes and projects have been identified as those in which there are best expressed provisions of incorporation of new ones from outside into what already exist and are available within the village communities. It is concluded that development to be innovative, people-centered and pragmatic, it must be designed in such a way that it becomes congruent with the existing conditions, contexts, culture, institutions and genius traditions of the villagers. It is asserted that the greater this congruence, the greater would be the programme and project-effectiveness. It is believe that the centrality of integration, accommodation, adjustment, negotiation and configuration between "new" and "old" can no longer be ignored if innovative development is to take place in the real sense.

It is hoped that these lessons will be of enormous value to the practitioners of rural development, policy-makers, scholars and students of Sociology, Anthropology, Public Administration and the general public interested in how society can be developed thought the joint innovative efforts of the government and the people.

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FUNCTIONS OF AN ORGANIZATION IN AN INDIGENOUS IRRIGATION SYSTEM: A Case Study from a Hill Village of Nepal.

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1.   Introduction

Agriculture in Nepal contributes about 40 percent of the country's total Gross Domestic Product (GDP). But this agricultural economy, the source of livelihood and employment for 81 percent of the population, largely depends on the erratic rains which come during the period of monsoon from June to September. For this reason, irrigation acquires great importance as a strategy for increasing agricultural efficiency, augmenting agricultural yields and generating larger incomes.

Nepal is very rich in indigenously built irrigation systems. According to the updated Master Plan for Irrigation Development, 1995, the total irrigable agricultural area in Nepal is estimated at 1,766 thousand hectares comprising 1,005 thousand hectares of the existing irrigation. The 75.7% irrigable area is in the Terai and remaining 24.3% in the Hills and Mountains. Out of the existing irrigated area of 1,005 thousand hectares, about 721 thousand hectares or 71.8% is managed by the farmers and the remaining 284 thousand hectares or 28.2% by the Department of Irrigation. About 721 thousand hectares of the farmer-managed irrigation systems consists of 582 thousand hectares under surface irrigation and 139 thousand hectares under groundwater (East Consult, 1995). As such, the indigenous irrigation systems remain the dominant source of irrigation in Nepal. Water and Energy Commission (1981:36) observes:

> Farmers more than anyone else are aware of the benefits to be derived from irrigation. As a result, they have developed or been instrumental in