

GROUP PROCESS FOR PEOPLE'S PARTICIPATION IN RURAL NEPAL : REFLECTIONS FROM A MICRO LEVEL STUDY¹

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INTRODUCTION

Small human groups² are considered as the strategic mediums of people's participation. They are the prime collective forums in local affairs. Their role in mobilizing the common people through some kinds of membership and adherence has been vital. Groups have been a perennial feature of human society. We have social traditions which indicate that people have always been engaged in some specific works collectively through some kinds of group, be it family, clan or so on. The problem is how to organize the rural people in modern secular groups, and how to activate them in the process of self-help development. It is believed that common people, if organized into groups, can tackle with the various power groups of the society. They can confront with the forces exploiting them. Organized people participate more actively and effectively than the dispersed ones.

The primary objective of the paper is to explore the viability of group process for people's participation in rural development efforts in Nepal. An attempt has been made to examine the performance of small farmer groups (SFGs) under the support of Small Farmer Development Programme (SFDP) in Chhatre-Deurali Village Development Committee, the coverage area of SFDP's sub-project office (SPO) under study. The area is situated in Lamidada ridge to Mahesh Khola basin of the eastern parts of Dhading District.

For the purpose of the present study some of the key variables such as size, intimacy, interaction, homogeneity, leadership and group spirit are selected in order to assess the group process. The state of participation has been examined through four broad phases, in which participation of the people themselves is

considered essential. These phases are decision-making, implementation, benefit-sharing, and evaluation.

Seventy respondents were selected on the basis of *purposive* sampling. The *key* and *peripheral* respondents were identified during the field study. Primary data was collected through interview, observation, and consultations with the local authorities. Area survey, pre-household survey and progress reports of SFDP were the sources of secondary information. Besides, a survey of various small groups, existing in the area, including the SFGs was carried out.

The Brahmin/Chhetri including the Sanyasi (52.7 per cent) and the Tamang (38.5 per cent) are the two predominant ethno-linguistic groups of Chhatre-Deurali (Project Survey of Chhatre-Deurali SPO, 1984). Agriculture has been the main occupation of the people. Agriculture, as an occupation, is not so unesteemed now-a-days in Chhatre-Deurali since vegetable farming is gradually becoming quite profitable. If we go through the general economic conditions of the people, small farmers³ dominate the scene. The project survey indicates that of the total 1,118 households, there are 921 (82.5 per cent) households of the small farmers (Project Survey of Chhatre-Deurali SPO, 1984).

RURAL DEVELOPMENT EFFORTS IN NEPAL

History of Nepal is largely a history of upheaval and uprising for power. After the political unification (1769-1816), attention of the nation was concentrated on maintaining law and order, political stability and territorial integrity. During the century-long Rana regime (1846-1950), ruling elites and their coteries were engaged only in vested interests of their own. It was only after the political change of 1950 that the concept of 'welfare nation state' emerged. Therefore, the need of 'development' is a recent realization in Nepal.

With the imposition of *Panchayat* system (1960), development strategy also changed. Subsequently, Tribhuvan Village Development Model (TVDM) introduced in 1952 was replaced by the *Panchayat* Development Model (PDM). Various other development programmes, coached with different priorities, followed it. Examples are Remote Area Development Programmes (RADPs), the Cooperative (*Sajha/Sahakari*) Movement, Integrated Rural Development Programmes (IRDPs), etc. (for a detail information on various rural development programmes in Nepal, see Adhikari : 1982; Pradhan : 1985). Though most of the

development programmes are forwarded on trial basis, it is important to note that 'rural development' has been the core of development strategy in Nepal.

Seven periodic plans have already been accomplished during the period of four decades of planned development. A substantial portion of internal resource is mobilized, a huge sum of foreign dollar (grants and loans) is poured, and various NGOs and INGOs are engaged in the process of rural development. The outcome, however, has not been so satisfactory (Ministry of Finance:1990).

It has been realized that one of the main constraints of rural development efforts in Nepal is the lack of people's participation. From the very beginning of rural development efforts, i.e. from TVDM, upto the IRDPs, people's participation has been a serious challenge (APROSC:1986). Taking this into consideration, a different kind of programme called Small Farmer Development Programme has been introduced since 1975 in a series of development experiments (for the concept of SFDP in general and SFDPs in Nepal in particular, see ADB/N:1986; APROSC:1985; IFAD:1980).

THE CONCEPT OF GROUP PROCESS

People's participation, a systematic concept of mobilizing the human resource, seems to have been connected with the group process because the scheme of activating the process of self-help development is possible only at the mass level (see Heck:1979; Oakley and Marsden:1987; Uphoff and Cohen:1978; Yadav:1980 for the concept of people's participation. Also see Lohani:1978; Sharma:1978; Uphoff:1978 for the state of people's participation in Nepal).

In this perspective, SFDP seems to be a significant medium of acquiring people's participation for rural development in Nepal. SFDP has adopted group process. It includes only the most vulnerable section of society- the small farmers, who have absolute majority in the total population. Besides, the programme is being reported as one of the most successful development programmes (ADB/N : 1986) and, it is a strategy for rural development that combines both the concepts of small group and people's participation for the first time in Nepal.

The conceptual scheme of SFDP is to identify the target group -the small farmers- from among the rural masses, and organize them into small functional groups so that their collectivity could enable them to participate in development process, the process which has been beyond their control and comprehension so far.

On behalf of SFDP, at least theoretically, priority is given to form small (not more than 25 members) homogeneous (in terms of socio-economic characteristics) and harmonious groups. All inputs and services required by the small farmers are provided on group liability, without any collateral. Small farmer groups (SFGs), thus formed, are supposed to be able to identify, plan, implement and evaluate their needs, programmes and benefits. Provisions of group meeting, group saving, training, and assistance in community works are the other formal arrangements of SFDP.

Hence, SFDP has been trying to acquire people's participation through group process. Group process has become the pivotal feature of SFDP, and thus, that of the current development strategy in Nepal.

SMALL GROUP PHENOMENON

Small groups are a recent origin in Chhatre-Deurali VDC. Until a decade ago, there were very few conscious collective forums. Neither the Brahmin, Chhetri, Sanyasi (Indo-Aryans) nor the Tamang (Tibeto-Burmese) had any socio-religious forum to bind and protect them and their cultures, as it can be found, for example, in the practice of *Sangha* among the *Theravada* Buddhists, the practice of *Communitas* among the Christians and that of *Ulema* among the Muslims.

In Chhetre-Deurali, as in other parts of the country, all the processes of production and consumption are confined to family level. Family is such a distinct institution that it is difficult to have any other joint units in inter-family level. However, it is poverty and common hardships of the majority of the villagers that it helps them feel 'consciousness of kind' and be a category. In this context, it is the economic aspect of rural life which makes the group process feasible.

Now-a-days, there are a variety of small groups in Chhatre-Deurali. Upto 990, 76 different small groups were identified in the area. Of them, SFGs were the most prominent in terms of coverage and performance. 68 SFGs were already formed at the time. Other small groups include two Society Welfare Associations (one in Ramche and another in Mahanta Gaon), two Dairy Promotion committees (one in Mahesh Kholra and another in Dumre Chour), Vegetable Marketing Committee (VDC wide), Paropakar Welfare Fund (Siran Chour, locally called the Hita Kosh), Religious Choir (Maidan), and Deurali Youth Club (Dumre Chour) (field study,1990).

Chhatre-Deurali SPO has been in operation since 1984. There are 5,364 small farmers residing in Chhatre-Deurali VDC (Project Survey of Chhatre-Deurali SPO, 1984). Among them, only 545 (10.16 per cent) small farmers are organized in SFGs. Out of 68 SFGs, 8 groups are formed purely by the local females. They are often called women's saving groups (WSGs).

Of the total beneficiaries, 349 (64.1 per cent) small farmers are from the Brahmin/Chhetri category. The second large beneficiaries (32.3 per cent) are from the Tamang ethnic group. Farmers from the occupational castes have negligible (3.6 per cent) inclusion (field study, 1990).

In respect to their performance on loan repayment, group meeting, group saving, etc. the SPO reports only 16 SFGs as 'progressive'. Almost half (30) SFGs are 'moderate', while 22 SFGs are likely to be 'defunct' (Chhatre-Deurali SPO, 1990). During the field study, it was found that most of the so-called 'defunct' SFGs were the older ones, larger in size, and organized by 'Dhakal Sir,' the first group organizer (GO) of Chhatre-Deurali SPO.

In brief, Chhatre-Deurali has three kinds of small group. First, there are some groups established and sustained by the local themselves. Examples are the Religious Choir, Deurali Youth Club, and the Paropakar Welfare Fund. Secondly, there are other groups inspired by some external agencies and sustained by the local villagers. Vegetable Marketing Committee, Dairy Promotion Committee fall under this category. Thirdly, most of the groups are both inspired and sustained by some external agencies. Examples are Society Welfare Associations supported by OXFAM and SFGs supported by Agriculture Development Bank (ADB/N). Small groups from the third category are relatively more functional and progressive, for the time being, because they obtain technical and economic supports regularly from their respective centres. Their sustainability is, however, obscure since there are no symptoms of any diminution in their external dependency.

SFGS AND THE QUESTION OF PARTICIPATION

The field observation reveals that the groups which are formed by the GO, in a hurry to show some progress, are almost defunct or doing very little. Rather those formed by the farmer themselves are more active and functional. In the majority of cases, large groups are not only socio-economically heterogeneous and spatially scattered, but also unmanageable and, thus prone to failure. Small-

sized groups, having 6 members in average, have shown fine performance in general.

There are 6 SFGs (group Nos. 1, 3, 8, 12, 30 and 34) whose progress has been hampered by the leadership crisis. However, there are other 6 SFGs (group Nos. 6, 11, 18, 25, 59 and 62) whose success is generally attributed to their leaders. Female leadership is an important aspect of Chhatre-Deurali SPO. The group leaders of 8 female SFGs gave an impression that they have comparatively a good family background, at least, in terms of family economy. They were relatively less mobile outside the village and were successful housewives. Male leaders, on the contrary, were more mobile, outspoken, and dominant in most of the cases. Males were literate previously whereas females were just about to be so through the literacy programme of SFDP. They had proved themselves as a receptive and conducive section of the population.

In Chhatre-Deurali SPO, except for 22 SFGs, others have more or less regular group savings. There are some groups, especially the female ones- such as group Nos. 24, 36, 40, 47 and 61- which did not have taken any loan, but were regular in their savings.

The SFDP has so far provided 12 different types of training. All total 284 small farmers have been trained. Among them, 3 groups (group Nos. 6, 11 and 62) have their leaders frequently trained in a variety of sectors, no matter how useful it was. There are many other SFGs (group Nos. 1, 2, 3, 9, 13, 39 and so on) whose members had never got any opportunity to take part in any training programme (Chhatre-Deurali SPO, 1990).

The SFDP manual describes that there are two types of evaluation procedure: self and participatory evaluations. Self-evaluation is done at the SPO level bi-annually. Participatory evaluation is done at the zonal level annually, in which ADB/N and line agencies' officials equally take part (ADB/N:1977). Chhatre-Deurali SPO, however, has never done any such self-evaluation. Only 3 group leaders have taken part in participatory evaluations.

Hence, in terms of participation, the SFGs are enough deficient. SFDP seems to be grossly unable to create a healthy environment for farmers' participation. Either the representatives (the group leaders) or the SPO staffs have decisive and imposing role in the phases of participation. Though the meetings are held, most of the decisions, however, do occur in ordinary day-to-day life. *Shramadan* (labour contribution) is popularly equated to people's participation. *Shramadan* is easily provided, but the process of control remains

not in the hands of these contributors but in the hands of some of the local elites.

It seems that SFGs are merely the channels of SFDP loan but not the forums of mobilizing the masses. A considerable number of members from various SFGs are almost passive now because SFDP has virtually stopped to provide them additional loans.

RELUCTANCE OF THE SMALL FARMERS

A substantial number of small farmers are yet outside the circle of Chhatre-Deurali SPO. It can be justified from the fact that only 10.16 per cent of potential beneficiary small farmers are organized so far. There are 53 households of the occupational castes, almost all of which are small farmers. However, there is not a single SFG organized only by such low caste people. None of the low caste small farmer is included in any SFG that has predominantly the Tamang memberships. A negligible number (18) of low caste small farmers are rather included in the SFGs that have the Brahmin/Chhetri majority.⁶

High level officials of SFDP complain that lack of initiative, lack of leadership capabilities, and that of risk-bearing capacities are some of the reasons behind the dispersed and passive state of the majority of small farmers. This blame rather seems a mere apology for not being able to tackle the problem. These officials have never bothered themselves to help enhance the initiative, leadership and risk-bearing capacities of such poorest of the poor.

The landless farmers who are not in any SFG have various grievances. First, it is frequently complained that small farmers who hold some land always refuse to include landless small farmers in the group. The land-owning small farmers use to suspect on the landless small farmers since the later does not have any collateral. It might cause trouble for them at the times of repayment. Secondly, most of the landless small farmers come from occupational castes, thus, the caste factor has been a barrier to their interaction. Similarly, almost all such landless people, with whom the researcher could approach, complained that not a single official from the SPO had ever come to them. The officials, on behalf of the SPO, want to maintain that SFGs are formed by the farmer themselves and not by the SPO.

The potential beneficiary small farmers are keen in observing the performance of the SFGs that are already formed. Since more than half SFGs are either passive or unsuccessful, they do not dare to form new groups. Thus, the demonstration effect has been negative in its consequence.

One of the main causes of such reluctance of majority of the small farmers is the lack of proper motivation by the well-paid Youth/Female Activists or the GO himself on behalf of the SPO. The bureaucratic approach of SFDP seems to be a hurdle since the SPO has not been able to explain itself within the majority of the potential beneficiaries. SFDP has shown symptoms of elite bias within the small farmers. The concept of people's participation itself, which the SFDP has followed, does not seem compatible with the local conditions of socio-cultural system. The people had been working on the basis of decisions either made by their own families, kinsmen or neighbours. Benefit-sharing had been mutual and evaluation informal. The process of participation enforced by SFDP, viz., decision-making, implementation, benefit-sharing and evaluation, seems to them rather artificial, formal and more statistical. The small farmers are even not aware on what to do with such 'step-by-step procedure'. Ultimately, SFDP seems to have been suffered from malaise to be a catalyst in improving the fate of local small farmers.

APPROACHING THE TARGET GROUP

Empirical observations reveal that small farmers either residing in the inaccessible area or from downtrodden sections (e.g. untouchable castes, women, landless, etc.) of the population have got little or no inspiration and/or opportunity to receive the services and facilities of SFDP. They are not even aware about SFDP objectives. There are, for example, only 7 Tamang women, 7 landless farmers and 18 lower caste people (Chhatre-Deurali SPO, 1990) fortunate to have the opportunity to stay in SFGs, regardless of how much are they benefitted.

Though all the beneficiaries of SFDP are supposed to be the small farmers, there is, however, a vast disparity of economic transactions amongst the registered small farmers. A handful of small farmers have occupied a considerable portion of loan, training opportunity and such other facilities.

Upto the last of 1990, there were 56 SFGs which had already taken loan once or more. In total, a sum of NC 1,938,000/- was allocated for 362 small farmers, 17 of whose transactions had blocked some 148 small farmers (Chhatre-Deurali SPO, 1990).

It seems that SFDP has been cycling around a particular section of the small farmers, officially called the 'progressive' ones, who are able to absorb most of the SFDP services. The only little remaining percolates down to the

subordinate small farmers. There is, for example, one group leader (of group No. 27) whose other 5 adult members of the family are all engaged in 5 different groups, taking advantages from all possible points. Field data clearly reveal that SFDP has been 'successful' to serve mainly the richer stratum of the small farmers. SFDP has never bothered itself to the needs, difficulties and hardships of the poorest small farmers.

The target group of SFDP, the small farmers, is clearly a distinct category of society. But SFDP seems partly successful to approach them. The 'target group approach' sounds nice to hear. SFDP has, however, never been alert on-the-spot to follow the strategic core of the concept. SFDP seems to be lounging after having identified 'the clients'. In Chhatre-Deurali, 89.84 per cent of the potential beneficiaries are not yet involved in the SFGs circle (Chhatre-Deurali SPO, 1990).

SELF-RELIANCE OF SPO

SFDP has adopted a new strategy in the case of Dhading District to develop secondary organizations at inter-group level, called *antar samuha*. Its main objective is to experiment whether the various SPOs could be made self-reliant on the already built-up structure.⁷

About this new strategy, I had requested my respondents to preview whether their SPO in general and the SFGs in particular would be self-reliant before or after the withdrawal of SFDP supports. Of the 70, fifty respondents replied it as 'quite unlikely and very difficult,' 14 respondents answered it as 'challengeful but not impossible,' and 6 respondents were confused. Most of the optimist respondents were either the group leaders or better benefitted ones. General respondents were suspicious over the confident of others and afraid of the possible monopoly of their leaders.

One of the important findings of the present study is that SFDP has not been able to stimulate group spirit, collectivity and we-feeling among the small farmers, as it was envisaged in the planning phase. Their collective group identity and group interests are not yet projected. Group-level planning and implementation are not occurring in their pure sense. Structured group meetings are mere formal gatherings. Group saving practice is quite irregular. The process of evaluation does not exist at all. There is a problem of communication gap within a group and between the groups. In brief, dependency of small farmers on SFDP has not decreased. Not a single SFG has been graduated;⁸ neither is there

any SFG independent in course of seven years of operation of the SPO in question.

CONCLUSIONS

Traditional groupings such as kinship, clan, lineage, etc. are the family-based institutions. Family is the ultimate unit of collective behaviour, however, handicapped by its inherent deficiency for inter-family collectivity. Nevertheless poverty is the cause that compels the rural people to be united and work in groups beyond the family level. Secular groups which complement and cut across the traditional institutions, however maintaining the indigeneous system of participation, seem essential to mobilize the rural people at the mass level.

SFDP has not been much successful to go deeper into the society and grasp the target populace adequately. Instead of being a catalyst agency, SFDP has become merely a loan-granting office. People in question are forming more groups only because in other way loan is not provided. The claim of SFDP that it has not followed the 'trickle down approach' of development is not completely true. It seems partly successful in forming groups, but it has shown many symptoms of malaise in mobilizing them in proper direction.

Despite these many shortcomings of SFDP, there are some positive symptoms, too. The findings of the present study reveal that small groups are the potential viable mediums of mobilizing the masses. The ever challenging component of self-help development, i.e. the lack of people's participation, could be achieved through the group process provided that it is inspired inductively and systematically. Small, compact, homogeneous and self-formed groups are more dynamic, cohesive and durable.

For Chhatre-Deurali, the innovative beginnings of some locally organized programmes and seemingly participatory trends are the results of collective behaviour of the local farmers through the group process. What has been obtained from group efforts in a relatively short span of time, not more than one decade, was not gained by strong individual efforts during the century-long history of the settlement. At least, the farmers have become optimist and interactive due to the presence of SFDP. The phenomenon, in general, indicates towards a hope that if approached in a proper manner, there is a lot of potential for people's participation through the group process in the rural development of Nepal.

FOOTNOTES

1. The material of this paper is based on the field studies carried out in March 1989 and Nov. 1990. The initial field work was accomplished with some other colleagues to present a report on rural communication to Human Resource Development and Research Centre (HRDRC). Necessary data was collected in the later field visits in course of preparing an MA dissertation (Luintel:1990).

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2. Small group is a unit of at least two or more individuals upto the maximum number, who can interact and communicate with one another. In this paper, terms like small human group, social group, small functional group, etc., are used interchangeably. For details on the concept of small group, see Esman and Uphoff : 1988; Hare : 1955; Larry et al. : 1983 and Mills : 1988.
3. We have not yet defined the small farmers. Central Bureau of Statistics has categorised them as those having less than one hectare of land (CBS : 1987). SFDP defines them as the farmers whose annual income does not exceed Rs. 950/- per head (ADB/N : 1986). For the present study, SFDP-definition has been followed which is inclusive to farm labourers, share-croppers, tenants and the owners of some cultivable land.
4. SFDP has not specified any indicators to evaluate the performance of various SFGs. Terms like 'progressive', 'moderate' and 'defunct', therefore, cannot only the relative state of group dynamism in general.
5. Group numbers are assigned serially on the basis of group formation and/or registration under SFDP.
6. It does not mean necessarily that the Tamangs are less likely to accept low caste small farmers in their groups. The settlement pattern of Chhatre-Deurali might have caused this. Households of the low caste people are mostly within the Brahmin/Chhetri settlements where as such intermix with the Tamang is rare. The Tamang settlements are ethnically concentrated, if not quite separate.

7. Meanwhile, the management of this SPO, among others, has been transferred to Small Farmers' Cooperative of Chhatre-Deurali from June 15, 1994 onwards. Henceforth, the administrative and financial supports on behalf of SFDP are withdrawn so as to make the farmers themselves capable of handling such group processes for self-help development. The small farmers have been now instructed to contact either ADB/N or other banking agencies in case of further loan needs. This decision has been implemented on the technical recommendation of Dhading Development Project (DDP), a GTZ - financed Integrated Rural Development (IRD) project. DDP is now evaluating the outcome of this 'experiment.'
8. Graduation, a term frequently used by SFDP officials, means a mark of success. Progressive SFGs are supposed to be able to take care of themselves, thus no longer needy of ADB/N supports. SFDP scrutinizes time by time whether some groups have reached the level.

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