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**New Roles in Civil Society – Current and Potential Roles
in Decentralised Decision-making in Rural Nepal.**

**A thesis presented in partial fulfilment
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Abstract

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By Helen Bernadette Sherpa

This study attempts to develop a better understanding of the roles civil society plays in rural Nepal. Makawanpur district has a diverse population and villages both remote and close to national highways and urban centres. The study was carried out during a period of political instability and civil war during which the functioning democratic government was replaced by an administration appointed by the King.

At the community level an active civil society undertakes a range of roles and responsibilities. The most significant organisations involving large numbers of people were those contributing directly to supporting livelihoods, including dairy co-operatives, savings and credit groups, forest and water user groups. State-controlled sectors such as education and health had weaker participation. Religious and ethnic organisations do not play significant roles while non-government organisations are present and contribute to welfare and development but do not have large memberships.

Many civil society organisations were “induced” but over time had evolved and developed their own agendas. Roles being undertaken included management of resources and utilities, supporting poverty alleviation and improved livelihoods, participation in decentralised governance and addressing social issues. Microfinance was a powerful motivating factor used both to form and keep groups together. Groups claimed “inclusiveness” but this could not be independently verified in this study.

Civil society theory holds that a healthy society balances the *Prince* (State), *Merchant* (commercial sector) and *Citizen* (civil society). Applying and understanding this theory in a rural environment is challenging and raises many questions as to what “balance”

would look like. The State presence is small, mostly in the form of schools and health posts, but it controls policies that affect civil society. Organisations felt they had little influence on policy. The commercial sector is also very poorly developed. In this environment, community based civil society organisations undertake many roles. Civil society is complex and can only be viewed in context of the given point in history and specific community power relations. As communities undertake more roles and responsibilities, they will need to be better understood and supported by the development industry if they are to achieve their full potential.

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Abbreviations

ABC Nepal	Agro-forestry Basic Health Co-operatives Nepal
CBO	Community Based Organisation
CFUG	Community Forest User Group
CPN-UML	Communist Party Nepal – United Marxist Leninist
CSO	Civil Society Organisation
DDC	District Development Committee
DfID	Department for International Development
FCHV	Female Community Health Volunteer
INGO	International Non-government Organisation
LGP	Local Governance Program
NGO	Non-government Organisation
PDDP	Participatory District Development Program
PTA	Parent Teacher Association
TTBA	Trained Traditional Birth Attendant
SAPPROS	Support Activities For Poor Producers of Nepal
SEACOW	School of Ecology and Community Work
SMC	School Management Committee
UNDP	United Nations Development Programme
UNICEF	United Nations Children and Education Fund
USAID	United States Agency for International Development
VDC	Village Development Committee

Chapter One - Introduction

"Civil society" has become omnipresent because it rings most of the political, economic and social bells of the late twentieth century. The ideas packed into the two familiar words are rich, overlapping, contradictory and in danger of being all things to all people; at the same time, however, they hold out tremendous inspiration for change." Alison Van Rooy et. al. 1998

As "civil society" and the strengthening of civil society becomes the focus of many donor initiatives it has become important to examine more closely the functions and objectives and evolution of civil society within any given community. Nepal located along the Himalayan range between India and China is one of the world's poorest countries. The United Nations ranks it amongst the developing countries with a Low Human Development and ranks it along with the Sudan and Bangladesh (UNDP 2000). With a population of 23 million, 85% of people in Nepal have no access to electricity, 40% lack clean drinking water, 28,000 children die each year from diarrhoea and poverty is rampant with more than 70% of the population being classed as poor by world standards (Dahal 2001). Nepal has only had a democratic multi-party political system for 12 years. From the early eighties the government started to allow independent grassroots organisations to form. These were usually single purpose such as water user groups or mother groups to promote health. In 1989 as single party regimes around the world toppled, Nepal also experienced a revolution that overthrew the one-party Panchayat system and replaced it with a multi-party democratic system. Expectations were high but the challenges the new leaders faced were immense. Many of the new leaders had been underground for most of their lives. Their roles as revolutionaries were difficult to reconcile with the tenacity and compromises needed to address longstanding development issues. While the political system and leadership have made little headway the situation in rural Nepal deteriorated. In 1996 the Maoists opted out of the political system and declared the 'Peoples War'. The Maoist Revolution now affects most districts of the country and has brought about the deaths of more than ten thousand citizens. In early 2002, after peace talks had broken down and violence had escalated, the Prime Minister dissolved both the House of Representatives and all elected local bodies. On October 4, 2002 the King finally became impatient and seized power installing a puppet government. In the past two years civil society organisations have been forced to operate without much support

from the government or development partners and in spite of attacks and harassment from government and Maoist armed forces.

Despite the lack of leadership from the politicians, the freedoms gained with democracy have helped encourage the emergence of a strong free press and an enormous number of local NGOs and small community based organisations. These organisations now take increasing responsibility for many aspects of life in rural Nepal. Communities manage forests, water supply systems, marketing systems for produce, dairy co-operatives, trail and bridge systems, rural hydro-electricity systems, pre-schools, historical and religious sites.

The donors, and demands from the community level, have forced a reluctant bureaucracy and political system to legislate greater decentralisation of decision-making and control over resources. Many urban-based planners, bureaucrats and politicians however continue to question the abilities of the rural “uneducated” farmers to assume the roles the donors want them to have. Teachers who for years have politicised the schools now claim that parents and school boards would politicise schools more. Government forest officers and politicians, that used to benefit from the money that flowed from shady forest deals, now rail against community forestry even as they admit the huge gains that have been made in improving forest cover. The hard won rights and control the community gained are constantly being eroded. Communities too are suspicious that government is using these community-based organisations (CBOs) or civil society organisations (CSOs) to abdicate its roles and responsibilities, without providing the resources or technical help that communities need to be successful.

The community have both recognised the need, and proven their ability, to manage resources at the local level. Many communities also believe that they cannot automatically trust central level decision-makers to act in their best interests. In this thesis I explore further the current situation to develop a clearer understanding of the roles community based organisations are fulfilling, their extent and inclusiveness, and what roles they might be able to undertake within Nepal’s new decentralised planning processes.

The current problems Nepal faces in achieving improved standards of living for one of Asia's fastest growing population's are daunting. Centralised control and massive inflows of aid have not been able to change rural poverty much. Many grassroots organisations have been successful but their coverage and impact is probably limited. This is especially so in hill districts of Nepal. Here distances are measured in walking hours and even simple solutions that work elsewhere, become expensive and impractical. By understanding what locals are achieving and where they face problems the organisations and those interested in supporting them can identify future strategies that increase their control over both resources and decision-making.

1.2 Research Plans and the Civil War

This thesis was originally proposed in 2001 when the civil war was still having a limited impact in many parts of rural Nepal. As the Maoist revolutions' impact became more widespread the fieldwork had to be postponed. In the spring of 2003 the initial planning meetings for fieldwork were held in Makawanpur District. Two local NGOs *Grameen Mahila Swabalumnum Kendra* and *Samadiyak Mahila Bikas Kendra* were approached for assistance. Both are women led non-government organisations that have been involved in a range of social and development activities. These NGOs were interested in participating in the research and saw this as an opportunity to learn more about civil society issues and what this concept means within their own communities. They agreed to mobilise their staff and members to help collect the information on the local civil society organisations. Several of the staff acted as research assistants in their working area.

Some modifications to the original research design were needed due to the escalating civil war and it was necessary to rely more on the survey information than on focus groups and interviews as had been planned. All fieldwork was done between June and December 2003 and involved weeks of volunteer time.

The original plan was collect information from state and non-state organisations promoting civil society groups and then do field survey to verify how the groups operate, inclusiveness, what they contribute and would like to contribute. This was to

then be followed up with focus group discussions with a representative sample of the groups identified. It would also interact with those not participating. To get an overview of the spatial participation in the district secondary information from the district offices was to be obtained to see if it would be possible to map the participation in different kinds of groups at the district level by Village Development Committee (VDC).

The survey was conducted in one district of Nepal, Makawanpur District (see Map 1 for location of district), by approaching all government line agencies and known INGOs and NGOs with programmes in the district for leads. From this secondary information the locations and membership of these groups was mapped. This initial information was to be crosschecked for four VDCs using semi-structured interviews and focus groups to get an indication of how these groups operate, what they contribute, and what they would like to do to improve the civil society. A cross-section of groups was included in this sample that are involved in different sectors such as education, savings and credit or community forestry. The survey tools were developed in collaboration with the local NGO partners in the research (see Annex 1).

In focus groups it is usual to use fairly simple language and to ask follow-up questions. Having to rely more on a survey conducted by assistants resulted in more standardised responses that lacked the depth that had been expected. The second problem arose immediately. The original idea was to try and create an overview of participation in civil society organisations (CSOs). The first step was to generate community maps that would roughly identify and locate the groups to be surveyed. The first VDC was Makwanpurghadhi and in the mapping exercise (see sample Map2) it became clear that there were more than 120 civil society organisations in just one of the four study VDCs. It would have been preferable at that point to reduce the scope of the study to just one or two VDC. However after numerous discussions about conducting this research over the previous year it seemed impossible to then not be interested in what these communities were doing. It was then agreed to survey a representative selection about 50 CSOs in each VDC.

Once the survey was underway I made a third visit to the district to start holding the focus group discussions. Focus group discussions were planned for two groups. Those involved in the community-based organisations and those not involved. These discussions were to identify the reason the group was formed, who led the process (a member of the community, another district person or an outside agency). What the group does. It's membership and inclusiveness i.e. of women, men, minorities in the community, different castes and socio-economic groups. What they feel they have achieved both for them as individuals and as a community. It was also hoped that the groups' potential to contribute in the future in its area of primary focus or in other sectors of concern to its members could be assessed.

By that time the security situation had deteriorated dramatically with general strikes in force preventing movement of transport. Hetauda then experienced a number of bombings. This was then followed by the Maoists declaring two of the study VDCs within their "closed areas" for which special permission was to be obtained. As the situation got worse the NGOs found it more difficult to ask questions and were nervous about having a very visible Westerner in the area asking questions. In November 2003 this was abandoned in favour of inviting a small representative group from each type of CBO to Hetauda but even this proved impossible with the escalating security problems and civil unrest. At that point it was decided to "wait until the situation improved" before doing the focus group discussions. In fact the situation has got worse with many incidents involving the Maoist and government forces and deaths including civilians and political leaders. While I was keen to complete my research it did not seem important enough to endanger the lives of the local NGO staff or risk jeopardising the work they do in their communities. After consultations with my advisor it was decided to discontinue the fieldwork and work with what information had been collected and the existing literature and secondary data. A total of 156 CSOs had been surveyed.

The use of secondary information was seen as a quick way to identify what the government, NGOs and others thought was happening and what civil society groups they believed they had helped form or strengthen. Most of the government line agencies, the District Development Committee, the UNDP programme representative and INGOs/NGOs were approached for information. Most of the information was in

Nepali and translation proved a major challenge as the names of VDCs and groups were often not clear. The usefulness of this information lies in the myths and perceptions it generates rather than what it really tells you about what is happening on the ground. It was not entirely unexpected that many of the CBOs mentioned by government weren't evident on the ground while many more they were unaware of were. Different government rules and regulations relating to decentralisation were also identified. A literature review of locally published works and conclusions in relation to civil society participation in Nepal were then compared with the information gathered in the focus district.

One aspect of special interest was to understand what skills groups had or would like to have. Some of this information came through in the survey but without focus group discussions it was not possible to gather as much of the detailed information as had been anticipated. This would have helped to better determine the generic skills (e.g. communication, organising, social mobilisation, bookkeeping) and the specific technical skills (e.g. forest management, silviculture, milk measurement, education planning) civil society organisations have or need to develop.

One suggestion was that the research topic could be refocused to assess what civil society does and how it functions in a conflict environment. In many respects the information gathered illustrates this but the more difficult questions about how the groups have been affected were not adequately touched upon to draw conclusions. It was frustrating to not be able to make more progress on the research despite numerous visits and weeks of effort. The NGOs did a great deal of work and it was unfortunate not to be able to complete the research as planned. In many ways I ended up wishing I had chosen a more compact and manageable topic in this environment. Still I feel if donors are ready to simply hand over huge responsibilities to communities without even knowing what is going on it was a topic well worth at least trying to understand better. Through this research the local NGOs, my colleagues and I have learnt a lot more about the complexity, diversity and issues in civil society and how they affect development. Hopefully they will help us as we struggle to address some of the challenging issues these communities face and view our work through the donor prism of civil society.