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# Capacity building with LeGGo: Expanding participation in Nepal

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## Introduction

In 1999 the government of Nepal passed the Local Self-Governance Act (LSGA) to devolve administrative, judicial and fiscal powers to locally elected bodies. In this context, improving the capacities of communities and marginalised groups to participate in local governance and development activities remains a key priority for international donors and the Nepalese government. Mindful of Baser and Morgan's (2008) five core capabilities, this paper reviews an ambitious attempt by the Adventist Development and Relief Agency (ADRA) in Kavre District to enhance local capacity through a two year Leadership and Good Governance Project. The central question explored is whether a combination of government staff training, community mobilisation and active community leadership in 60 micro projects has resulted in increased capacity of CBOs or communities as actors in a participatory development process.

## Background

Development in Nepal is challenged by a number of factors including difficult terrain and geographic remoteness, lack of institutional capacity, an unresponsive political climate, growing divide between rich and poor, declining returns in the agricultural sector, underinvestment in human capital, caste discrimination and the ongoing legacy of civil war and political instability. While recognising Nepal's progress in improving overall human well-being, it is noteworthy that, 'many groups still appear to have been left out of the development process'. (Wagle 2011:7).

Despite these challenges, with the support of international aid agencies, successive governments in Nepal have sought to increase participation in development and improve access to services through programs aimed towards the decentralisation of governance and service provision. In 1999 Nepal passed the Local Self-Governance Act (LSGA) which devolved administrative, judicial and fiscal powers to locally elected bodies. In theory the Act provides for better representation of disadvantaged groups in local governance and greater participation in development processes.

Innovations such as the Local Governance and Community Development Programme (LGCDP), run jointly by the Ministry of Local Development and United Nations agencies, seek to institutionalise systems and mechanisms for decentralised and inclusive local governance (Scanteam et. al 2009). Provisioning District Development Offices with funding for community led development initiatives is part of this process. However, as is the case in India, building the capacity of local stakeholders and community-based organisations is essential in regards to their ... dignity, confidence, and

courage to demand or seek access to services ... (Subramaniam 2003:1) or to initiate community-led improvements.

## Capacity building

Baser and Morgan (2008) note that capacity is essentially about the ability to do something effectively and to sustain improvement over time. They argue that people function within a range of complex human systems and often suffer from both low levels of capability and system blindness. In this context the challenge for external interveners is arguably one of making systems visible and encouraging the emergence and growth of capabilities on a micro level to engage with and function within those systems. For example, in Nepal this might involve: training leaders of women's cooperatives in leadership and management; raising awareness of legal and political rights; and facilitating engagement with local government and funding partners.

Baser and Morgan (2008:26–32) define capability '... as the collective skill or aptitude of an organisation or system to carry out a particular function or process ...' and identify five core capabilities: the capability to commit; the capability to carry out technical, service delivery and logistical tasks; the capacity to relate and attract resources and support; the core capability to adapt and self-renew; and finally, the capability to balance diversity and coherence, building networks while managing paradox and tension. To some extent all of these capabilities are required by community based organisations (CBOs) in Nepal and while governments would normally assist with such capability development, the reality is that international non-governmental NGOs (INGOs) often play a key role.

In Nepal, capacity limitations and system blindness are very real issues. Local stakeholders and grassroots organisations often have constrained capacity, low confidence, minimal awareness of local governance processes and lack of experience in accessing funding sources. An assessment conducted by ADRA Nepal identified low capacities and lack of management knowledge among government officials, as well as low civil society participation amongst a number of factors limiting the effectiveness of governance strategies for promoting participation and empowerment (ADRA, 2008). In the words of one Nepali cooperative member interviewed in 2012 '*We don't know how to approach the government*'. To complicate matters, local government is often unaccustomed to working closely and collaboratively with community based organisations (CBOs), including cooperatives.

## LeGGo project

Mindful of the need to develop the capacity of CBOs and local government in Nepal to work together towards local

development objectives, The Adventist Development and Relief Agency (ADRA) in Nepal began to explore new programming methodologies during 2006. Building on these early experiences, the Leadership and Good Governance Project (LeGGo) was implemented by between January 2009 and December 2010 in partnership with local government — the District Women’s Development Office (DWDO), CBOs and communities in 10 Village Development Committees (VDCs) in Kavre District. Small-scale monitoring and follow-up activities for some communities extended into late 2011.

The first component of the LeGGo project focused on improvement of leadership capacities and management skills at the District Government level. ADRA sought to enable officials in Kavre District, ‘to effectively utilize local resources, efficiently manage new development projects, adequately identify local needs, and provide higher quality services to local communities’ (ADRA 2008:3). To do so ADRA Nepal provided a series of leadership and management capacity building workshops for district officials.

The second component of the LeGGo project targeted CBOs for leadership and management capabilities training. ADRA sought to, ‘enable them to more effectively design and implement projects related to health, education, agriculture, literacy, income generation, natural resource management, human rights, and other activities’ (ADRA Nepal, 2008:3). ADRA selected and trained 30 master trainers (MTs) who, using their new skills and knowledge, were empowered to train a ‘total of 300 womens’ and farmers’ group members’ as local facilitators.

Facilitators came from a selection of communities identified jointly by local government and ADRA staff based on the following criteria: poor and marginalised (generally assessed by ethnicity, caste or geographic isolation); communities willing to participate; communities with existing CBOs (either womens’ or farmers’ cooperatives); communities accessible by public transport up to one full day’s travel (ADRA 2008:3). To provide community groups with tangible skills, 60 Challenge Projects were identified by facilitators and CBOs, approved by ADRA staff then provided with a very small amount seed funding (12,000 Nepali Rupees or USD\$130). With coaching and training provided by ADRA and the Master Trainers, Challenge Projects were often undertaken with additional contributions and support from the government Village Development Committees (VDCs) and District Development Committees (DDCs) and/or community fundraising efforts.

The intent of the project was that beneficiaries and CBOs would gain and retain the capacity to independently identify local development needs, form action groups, design interventions, obtain funding and manage the project itself. An implicit objective of these initiatives was reducing system blindness in CBOs and improved confidence to work with local government to apply for funds for community led development projects. In this sense the micro-projects are best seen as a vehicle for participatory development or community driven

development in which communities have ‘direct control over key project decisions, including management of investment funds’ (Mansuri and Rao 2004:2).

## Research methodology

A post-project evaluation of LeGGo was carried out in June 2012, approximately one year after project activities ceased for the majority of challenge projects in Kavre District. The research was qualitative and is best described as mixed-method, utilising a combination of focus group interviews and participatory, visual evaluation tools. For example, participants rated their satisfaction on key outcomes by placing sticky notes beside a range of expressive faces and then moved the sticky notes after discussion and dialogue.

The research team analysed ADRA’s LeGGo project records to identify four categories of Challenge Project that had been proposed by target communities — Water and Health 21/60, Roads and Buildings 16/60, Livelihoods Development 14/60 and Organisation Strengthening 9/60. Maintaining a proportional balance, a total of 16 challenge projects were randomly selected for evaluation.

During the course of the research each of the selected project sites was visited and inspected by a team consisting of the lead researchers, ADRA Nepal staff and research assistants including local translators. The evaluation team met with key stakeholders (over 300) including ADRA staff, district government officials, community facilitators, and community members who were involved in, or aware of the challenge projects. Informed consent was obtained in all cases through a group information, question and consent process. The majority of people involved were community members and facilitators.

Focus group discussions, incorporating a participatory, visual capacity change ranking matrix, were used to assess the perceptions of the primary stakeholders relating to changes in the community and reinforcement of three capabilities resulting from the implementation of Challenge Projects. These were the attainment of leadership and planning skills, enhanced ability to elicit community cooperation, and enhanced ability to mobilise resources. Data was disaggregated by gender to enable analysis of any patterns in the responses of men and women involved in LeGGo.

## Case studies

### *Chamunda Devi Village — Ugrachandi Nala VDC — Kavre District*

The Nala Bridge Challenge Project is significant in that the small amount of seed funding -12,000 Nepali Rupees (NR) — for the initial challenge project and training sessions resulted in a series of community led projects spearheaded by a women’s cooperative that successfully raised more than three million NR. Although the challenge project did not result in large amounts of funding from the Village Development Committee or District Development

Office (just 25,000 NR), the funds mobilised within the community were impressive and appropriate given the wealth evident in the community and the size of the cooperative.

With the cooperation of men, this women-initiated project was able to construct a bridge, widen a village road, divert a creek, make a retaining wall, level a volleyball court, begin refurbishment of a temple and construct a cremation area, significantly expanding on the objectives of the original Challenge Project. Members of the women's cooperative were asked to rate the success of the project out of a score of ten. They unanimously rated it 10 out of 10 stating that *'the amount of funding was small but ADRA showed us the way'*. When asked why the project was successful the research team was informed that *'the project was the number one priority of the community'* and despite some initial challenges *'men and women worked well together'*.

The community scored the project highly in terms of their satisfaction with the level of change in their capacity across all three of the capacity domains studied. In particular leadership and planning skills as well as resource mobilisation were scored very highly with a strong degree of consensus among the participants. Community cooperation was scored lower and with less consensus due to some early challenges that had to be overcome at the start of the project, but participants emphasised that the end outcome had been very positive.

The research team identified several factors that they believe contributed to the success experienced by this community. Firstly, the women's cooperative was a relatively mature organisation and had an established relationship with ADRA Nepal. Existing capacity was at a level that was able to maximise the training and support provided by the LeGGo initiatives so that the project served as a catalyst for community led, participatory development. Secondly, the challenge project selected was one which benefited the whole community and enabled widespread ownership (including support from men despite the project being initiated by a group of women). Furthermore it was closely linked to important community priorities with clear economic, cultural, religious and safety benefits.

#### ***Narayansthan Dalit Village — Hokse VDC — Kavre District***

The Challenge Project selected by the community in Narayansthan consisted of a clay brick community building. The project is significant for its apparently low level of success and an insightful discussion among beneficiaries in which some community members demonstrated reluctance to criticize the project for fear that this would result in reduced future support. For example, one participant said *'If we give low score ADRA will not help in future'*. Once this fear had been addressed, it became apparent that although 50,000NR was successfully obtained from local government for construction their community building, and the project was completed using scarce village labour and resources, the skills and

confidence acquired during the challenge project had atrophied after LeGGo ended.

The limited transfer of skills and capacity was evident in concerns expressed by female leaders. Despite participation in training and the subsequent completion of a Challenge Project, cooperative leaders insisted that they did not know how to plan a much needed additional water project, how to budget it or approach the government or NGOs for help. Community members were critical of their own abilities to initiate change, stating that, *'Water is a big problem here. We have to walk far. We don't know how to go to get help from VDC or DDO'*.

Although they were moderately pleased with the humble building they had constructed, the community scored the project very low in terms of their satisfaction with the level of change in their capacity across all three of the capacity domains studied. In particular leadership and planning skills were scored very low with a strong degree of consensus among the participants. Community cooperation and resource mobilisation were scored slightly higher as participants agreed that there had been cooperation within the community and resource mobilisation from local government to support the building construction, however, overall participants demonstrated a low level of confidence in their ability to retain new capacity.

The research team identified several factors they believe contributed to the lower levels of success experienced by this community. Critically, the leadership group involved in the project was largely illiterate which inhibited some of their engagement in the project training. More importantly, however, illiteracy coupled with a lack of confidence related to marginalisation and discrimination experienced by Dalits in Nepal, contributed to an inability to replicate the challenge project process without external support and facilitation. Significantly, this community began with very low levels of pre-existing capacity and community mobilisation, and was less able to leverage existing capacity for ongoing community development.

## **Observations and learning**

### ***Reduced system blindness***

Eleven out of the 16 community groups included in the assessment accessed external funds (ranging from 4,750 to 50,000 NR) from local government or other non-community sources for their initial Challenge Project or for subsequent, independently organised projects. Six of the community groups attained government funds for additional post-Challenge Projects (ranging from 17,000 to 450,000 NR) despite five of them being unsuccessful in obtaining funds for their initial challenge project. In one case a 12,000 NR challenge project to build a shoe storage facility in a local temple was not matched with any government funding but the skills built in the community enabled them to plan and implement several successive projects with funding in excess of 1.2 million NR. Success in accessing government funds was higher in more established cooperatives and groups with higher levels of literacy.

### *Improved community mobilisation and cooperation*

Fourteen of the 16 communities involved in this study demonstrated relatively high degrees of community mobilisation to plan and implement challenge projects as well as additional follow-up projects in a number of cases, despite frequently expressed concerns that the financial incentive offered by ADRA Nepal was far too small. Only two of the 16 failed to raise any funds within the community. While it was difficult to estimate labour, cash and local materials contributions, the research team found that community estimates of their contributions ranged from 3,000 to 1.5 million NR. After removing those two communities which raised nothing, and one community which raised a relatively large amount, the average per community was 32,000 NR (approximately 435USD). Women's cooperatives involved in LeGGo and the implementation of community challenge projects also reported significant gains in membership. Challenge projects that served genuine community-wide needs rather than just the needs of a small group within the community generally showed higher levels of success in terms of triggering increased (and ongoing) cooperation between larger numbers of people and groups within the community.

### *Leadership and management in the community*

The development and maintenance of leadership and management skills was more difficult to ascertain among community participants. Only one project site provided copies of project documentation, timelines, budgets and written agreements. While the trainings provided were appreciated, it was clear that in some instances newly acquired knowledge was not transmitted to other potential beneficiaries. In the words of one disgruntled villager, *'I was totally left out of the training. I know nothing about what has happened'*. In cases where existing capacity was relatively low it appeared that the single cycle of training and challenge project implementation provided for in the LeGGo timeframe was inadequate to facilitate a sustained transfer of leadership and management capacity to people from marginalised and disadvantaged groups.

### *Leadership and management in local government*

The long term benefit of training local government staff as facilitators or MTs appears to have been limited due to the high transfer rates of government staff in Kavre District. Of approximately 25 government staff trained and directly engaged in LeGGo, only three remained in the area one year after the project had concluded. Comments from government officials who met with the research team indicated that capacity building provided to government staff was appreciated however, the number of staff trained was inadequate. Other comments also suggested that the LeGGo approach was not fully understood or supported by all government staff and the majority of staff wanted greater incentives provided to spend time in the field as MTs. Just one of the government staff indicated that he was still regularly using the skills learned through engagement with LeGGo.

### **Conclusion**

Capacity building by ADRA to enhance the participation of vulnerable and marginalised communities at the micro-level in Nepal's Kavre District was most successful where some form of existing capacity existed and where there was a cohesive group of stakeholders who agreed on a priority. Such groups were capable of mobilising significant community and government support for their own development projects, despite very small amounts of seed funding.

Micro-level capacity building was least evident where smaller groups within a community, with vested interests, allocated resources for self-gain. Where such dynamics were present the inclusion of less powerful groups within the community was hampered, resulting in reduced spread of leadership and management skills, and limited community cooperation. Projects such as LeGGo can also inadvertently result in the formation of temporary groups which lapse, and lose capabilities once the project is complete, unless identifiable risk factors associated with this are managed. Although not included in the two case studies presented above, an example is that of a small group of women who banded together to access a grant and subsequently spent the money on wool for a knitting business that benefited only themselves.

It is evident that the development of sustained management and leadership capacity in recently formed, or highly disadvantaged, community groups, such as a Dalit cooperative, requires ongoing support beyond a single training and Challenge Project cycle. Based on recommendations that ongoing support be provided for community groups with emerging levels of capability, a follow-on project is using a modified and longer term approach involving a graduation process for communities with evidently high levels of capacity. It may be that low capacity community groups would benefit from several concurrent Challenge Projects with proportionally reduced, or perhaps even increased, levels of INGO funding over time.

Nepal faces ongoing challenges related to inclusion and equitable distribution of the benefits of development. Commitment to continued devolution of power and funding to local government remains a key platform of Nepal's development strategies. In this context, ADRA's LeGGo project provides a useful methodology for improving capacity on a micro-scale for a stronger civil society and greater inclusion of marginalised groups in local, participatory development processes. Empowerment and capacity development at a micro-scale is possible and can be catalysed by local NGO staff while respecting the tenets of community-driven development as enunciated by Mansuri and Rao (2004). In the words of one loosely quoted water committee representative, *'Before ADRA came we were not even thinking about this. Now 21 households are benefiting. We are satisfied.'* The ongoing challenge is to sustain such change over time, especially in communities and CBOs where pre-existing capacity is very low.

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