

Re-envisioning Development Governance in Nepal: Exploring Collaboration between Development Organizations and Local Levels

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Abstract

This concept paper calls the local bodies of the Government of Nepal to explore collaboration with the development organizations at the juncture of state restructuring following the declaration of The Constitution of Nepal 2015. The paper employs a social constructivist approach to look at development governance and suggests collaboration based on strengths perspective for effective and efficient development practice in Nepal. This concept paper is based on primary experiences of the author and secondary literature review. It suggests a three-pronged approach for collaboration and offers insights on the basics of such collaboration.

Key Words: Collaboration, development organizations, local bodies

Introduction

Nepal witnessed the declaration of its much-awaited Constitution, drafted through a Constituent Assembly process, on 20 September 2015. This constitution restructured Nepal from a unitary structure of governance to a Federal Democratic structure. Nepal was thus politically divided into 7 Provinces and 756 local levels. The earlier structure of governance has received several criticisms for its inability to address the development needs and governance in Nepal. The public system in Nepal has been criticized as being poorly managed and resourced and corrupt amidst an unstable government; in the absence of good governance and efficient institutions, there is a risk that effort of NGOs and foreign aid is being wasted and not incorporated into a country's priority developmental plan (Karkee & Comfort, 2016). Subedi (2018) highlights that the recently published World Bank Report 'Public Launch of the Systematic Country Diagnostics of Nepal' (2018) flags that the present model has failed to achieve rapid development and poverty reduction goals. It further says Nepal needs to immediately change the development model in order to succeed its federal system. Pokharel (2015) argues that Nepal has everything in place including abundant natural resources, adequate workforce, democratic institutions and practices, supportive international community and stresses the need for effective governance.

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Studies show the lack of proper co-ordination between governmental and nongovernmental organizations (see Dhakal, 2007; Dhakal & Ulvila, 1999; Pokharel, 2015). Dhakal (2007) presents that weak financial base, lack of professionalism, lack of monitoring and evaluation, lack of transparency, lack of commitment among the NGO activists, and the absence of public surveillance are some of the key challenges of the earlier system of governance. Pokharel (2015) furthers that low accountability, responsiveness and transparency; rampant corruption, non-inclusive governance; low credibility of public institutions and over politicization in governance add to this challenge. My own experiences of working as a development practitioner resonate with the claims made by both Dhakal and Pokharel. The problem of effective coordination between development organizations and Government includes lack of clearly specified modus operandi in the existing legal instrument for a better coordination among the NGOs and the local development agencies; politicization of Social Welfare Council (SWC) executive committee, rather than a professional approach based on competence; lack of SWC capacity to govern increased number of affiliated NGOs/INGOs; and lack of a clear demarcation of functional roles in the SWC Act between Ministry of Women Children and Social Welfare, and SWC for governing the NGOs (Dhakal, 2006). Dhakal (2007) states that the lack of coordination and absence of understanding among the NGO communities and the government often creates a problem of doubt in Nepal.

In the context discussed above where a significant gap between the Government and development organizations can be clearly seen, the constitutional delegation of power through restructuring of the State provides us with opportunities to re-envision development governance in the nation to do away with the existing inadequacies and ineffective coordination. This paper focuses specifically on collaboration between development organizations and local levels and how the earlier problems associated with development governance in the country can be dealt with to make development interventions meaningful, efficient and effective.

Theoretical Framework

The paper adopts a social constructivist approach to look at the area of development governance and is guided by the belief that knowledge is produced through lived experiences and discourses. According to Vygotsky (1968), who introduced this approach, language and culture play essential roles both in human intellectual development and in how humans perceive the world. Humans' linguistic abilities enable them to overcome the natural limitations of their perceptual field by imposing culturally defined sense and meaning on the world; language and culture are the frameworks through which humans experience, communicate, and understand reality (gsi.berkeley.edu). The paper relies heavily on strengths perspective suggested by

Saleebey (2002) who believes that working with clients should be focused on the client's strengths. The paper also draws from collaboration theory which calls for joint decision making among key stakeholders (Wood & Gray, 1991). This is a concept paper based on primary experiences of the author and secondary literature review.

Operationalization

The key concepts in this paper are development governance, collaboration, development organizations and local level. Development organizations, in this paper, refer to any non-governmental, non-profit, voluntary citizens' group organized on a local, national or international level; local level refers to the village bodies, municipalities and district assemblies that are said to fall under the local level as per The Constitution of Nepal, 2015; development governance refers to the way rules, norms and actions are structured, sustained, regulated and held accountable, and collaboration is a process of joint decision making among key stakeholders of a problem domain about the future of that domain (Wood & Gray, 1991).

The Development Challenges

The fundamental question beginning the discussion on re-envisioning development governance is if development organizations understand the multiple realities of the communities they claim to change with their intervention. It is crucial to evaluate the extent to which development organization understand the perception of realities of the beneficiaries whose lives they intend to change (Powell, 2006).

A common criticism of participatory methodologies is that despite their claim to be inclusive of stakeholders they very often use participation as a technique for planning projects identified by the donor rather than raising discourses on where people participate and where they do not (Hickey & Mohan, 2005). Another common criticism is that local politics are often disregarded and development planning overlooks the challenges that frontline workers face on an everyday basis. (Townsend et al., 2002) also point to the problem in sheer volume of documentation and highly bureaucratic engagement demanded by donors that is reducing the time and quality of contact between partners often resulting in slow and inefficient implementation of development intervention.

Another criticism that I have often heard of development organizations is that they are mostly result driven and less focus is given to the process. An example can be taken of the ubiquitous Self Help Group (SHG) models where formation of SHGs is done with little work on the process of formation and not much attention is paid to inclusion-exclusion within this process and the membership of the SHGs; I have experienced this myself in the evaluation of SHG groups in parts of Nepal Another problem spotted by a majority of the people with any experience with the development organizations is their

external accountability (or donor oriented) nature. Dhakal (2007) contends that Nepali NGOs are primarily funded (up to 95%) from donors and INGOs, funding from the government accounts around 4% and mere contribution of 0.5% is made by members of the NGOs; this presents severe financial crisis in the absence of donors often leading NGOs to compromise to the conditions of donor/INGOs.

With the constitutional delegation of power to local bodies, there is scope for the much needed change to happen within development organizations. There is an opportunity to move from an agenda driven format set by donors towards a client centered perspective where the clients are treated as experts by experience. One such model is community organization suggested by Ross (1967) where a community identifies its needs or objectives, orders these needs or objectives and takes action, and in so doing develops a co-operative and collaborative attitudes and practices within the community. In this model, the community itself lists out internal and external resources to deal with the problems they identify or pursue their chosen interests. They also have an opportunity to move away from being output oriented to process oriented, paying attention to the people and organizations that play a crucial role in the organized change. The development organizations also have an avenue to shift their accountability from external funders to local clients. There is also ample scope to move towards intra-agency collaborations to make development work reliable, wide, effective and efficient.

The Constitution of Nepal 2015 has opened limitless opportunities for the local levels. They can now shift from the Kathmandu centric governance to local self-governance; from inadequate monitoring and evaluation to a closer monitoring and evaluation; from a state of unclear development agenda that is most often left at the discretion of donors to local levels setting their own development priorities. The move from bleak bureaucracy and Red Tapism to a responsive and accessible bureaucracy can be phenomenal in the arena of development governance.

The Way Ahead: Re-envisioning Development through Collaboration

In the pretext that development governance suffers largely from ineffective coordination between key stakeholders, this paper proposes strategies for collaboration between the local bodies and the development organizations which could be crucial to effective development. In this section of the paper, I suggest a three-pronged collaborative approach to development and offer the basics for such collaboration. I propose that development in Nepal through the local levels can be re-envisioned through a three-pronged collaborative approach ARK which would stand for agenda setting, resource mapping and keen collaboration.

The Three-pronged ARK Approach

As part of this approach, local levels set their agenda for development and invite relevant development organizations to collaborate; they map out all development organizations and services in their jurisdiction to foster collaborations encouraging the sharing of best practices, building on and avoiding duplication of work; and ensuring a keen collaboration where local levels demand accountability from development organizations and provide efficient support in return.

Agenda Setting

Nepal is a nation with multiple realities with people having multitude of lived experiences and wide-ranging strengths and challenges. Thus, setting up one agenda or development plan for all the country is neither possible nor desirable. Although helping the marginalized and the vulnerable needs an individualized treatment, the local bodies can identify the key issues among their constituencies and decide on their priorities. The key in agenda setting is bringing the constituencies together and deciding on development agenda through a democratic decision-making process.

Resource Mapping

Resource mapping is a strategy commonly utilized in the development sector to identify and analyze the existing resources in a community including people, programs and services. Also known as community resource mapping, it helps a community to better identify its needs and decide on the areas of intervention. Toolkit: Community Resource Mapping (n.d.) shares the following principles that are important in and integral to the mapping efforts: a) mapping strategies focus on what is already present in the community with the idea to build on the strengths within a community; b) mapping is relationship-driven where the key to mapping efforts is the development of partnerships—a group of equals with a common interest working together over a sustained period of time to accomplish common goals; and c) mapping embraces the notion that to realize vision and meet goals, a community may have to work across programmatic and geographic boundaries. Local bodies can conduct a thorough mapping of their communities with the help of their constituencies; such exercises can help to build the confidence of communities to address their needs with their own resources and to take charge of their problems. Nevertheless, it is a very helpful strategy for identifying resources that can be used in community organization and development practices.

Keen Collaboration

I contend that a socially just and mutually beneficial partnership can be formed between the development organizations and the local bodies in a collaborative effort to re-envisioning development in Nepal. By keen collaboration I suggest that local bodies

should provide the development organization with effective support to run their programs including linking them to existing resources, efficient administration and the development organizations should in turn offer accountability to the local bodies and collaborate in the agenda set by them. The work of the development organizations should focus on strengthening existing resources including human resources and empowering the partners in development including those who benefit from their programs and services directly or indirectly. Development organizations should envision programs that would ultimately be handed over to the communities so that newer programs and services can be envisioned through this keen collaboration. Here I offer the basics or the ABCs for such collaboration which should significantly pave the way forward in development governance:

Amalgamating Knowledge.

The first pillar for keen collaboration that I suggest is amalgamation of knowledge accumulated by the development sector with the existing knowledge of problems and solutions in the communities. Basing on the fact that most of our development organizations have connections in the Global North it will be opportune to bring together the cutting-edge Information and Communication Technology from the Global North and our indigenous knowledge and practices. Such an amalgamation might be mutually beneficial as development organizations can learn from communities throughout the world and share best practices so that knowledge sharing can happen in its truest sense.

Building Knowledge Banks.

The second pillar for keen collaboration that I suggest is building of the knowledge banks by local bodies. Powell (2006) opines that the crucial point to be made about 'knowledge' in relation to development is that there is no universal understanding of what it is; we all 'know' the world through a combination of our education, language, culture, and belief and, just as importantly, our actual physical realities - gender, location, socio-economic environment. Powell shares the social constructivist paradigm that the author takes on knowledge claiming that how life is known, that is, how it is experienced and understood inevitably varies profoundly according to these differences.

We know that all development organizations maintain information on their programs, either for their own administrative purposes or to meet donor requirements. We have seen that organizations in Nepal that attract donors generally have better recording, monitoring and evaluation systems. Such evidences can be significant in future planning purposes. The biggest challenge, though, lies in bringing such evidences together. We have seen that much of the publications and researches conducted on and by the development organizations in Nepal have been valued outside of Nepal and there is

an inadequate management of such practice-based evidence within the nation. The duplication of work by development organizations has thus been difficult to track and there has been inadequate sharing of best practices. Very often organizations conceptualize and implement projects in new practice areas from scratch and Powell (2006) flags that it can be highly alienating for those local people involved who, not infrequently, find themselves being asked the same or similar questions time after time, without necessarily seeing much tangible benefit as a result. Local bodies can lead the creation of knowledge banks for practice-based evidence which will in turn lead opportunities for evidence-based practices within their constituencies.

Co-constructing Knowledge.

The third pillar for a keen collaboration that I suggest is co-construction of knowledge. Powell (2006) flags that we have to consider what 'knowledge' means - not only to ourselves, but also to the other stakeholders involved - and think about which 'knowledge' we are referring to. Powell challenges that the current writing on knowledge management that typically offers a neat hierarchy of data, information and knowledge is not incorrect, but it gives a misleading impression of simplicity. Powell (2006) also points that all visions view development as a process which involves change for the better; it is a process which cannot happen, and certainly cannot lead to the intended outcomes, unless it is based both on a good understanding and appreciation of the socio-economic reality that the development is intended to change. It is therefore crucial to appreciate and integrate the knowledge and experiences of the local population who are experts by experience with the knowledge and experiences of the development practitioners who are experts by training.

Relevant in this context is the domination of English language in the development sector. The bulk of the funding for development activities in Nepal comes from the global North and with it comes the conditions attached, beginning from selection of development partner/s, reporting, monitoring and evaluation requirements which are in English. This is particularly disempowering for the workers and agencies in the frontline who have the experience and the expertise of working in communities but struggle with the English language. This has inevitably resulted in employment of professionals with an expertise in English rather than expertise in working with communities at higher levels of development management. This in turn has also contributed to an artificial knowledge gap between frontline practitioners and donors. Powell (2006) contends that by failing to engage systematically with local languages, the sector limits its understanding of and its ability to communicate with most of its intended beneficiaries and failure to addressing the issue of language fully carries the high costs of ignorance and inefficient

communication. In order for development to be about life, it has to be able to connect with the languages of the beneficiaries (Powell, 2006).

This sensitive yet very important situation presents the local bodies with an opportunity to bridge the gap by bringing ‘experts by training’ and ‘experts by experience’ together. It will be opportune to bring in social workers in the team who have the academic orientation on working with individuals and communities; are equipped to deal with the complexities of development work with utmost sensitivity, and are trained in a foundation of social justice, human rights and respect for diversities. IASSW (2014) declares that social work engages people and structures to address life challenges and enhance wellbeing with an underpinning by theories of social work, social sciences, humanities and indigenous knowledges.

Conclusion

The promulgation of the people’s constitution and redistribution of governance in Nepal through State restructuring has undoubtedly provided an opportunity to re-envision development Governance in the country. It also presents a great vantage point to establish collaboration between development organizations and local levels in a way that could not be done in a unitary system of governance. Although the idea of bringing donors to work in Nepal in her own terms and conditions might look ambitious and herculean, it is a much-needed step towards effective change that both the Government of Nepal and the development organizations envision.

The development organizations in Nepal, in the past, have been Kathmandu centric and donor driven, and little space had been set aside for indigenous knowledge and practices. Thus, at this important juncture in nation building it is imperative to re-envision development governance that would be accountable to its constituencies more than the donors and mobilize aid in their own terms and conditions so as to obtain optimal results. A three-pronged strategy of agenda setting, social mapping and keen collaboration can be effective in building collaborative development governance in the country where the local bodies are active leaders in defining and prioritizing their development needs and keys in bringing all the stakeholders together. A prominent need identified in this paper is the acceptance and appreciation of local knowledge and expertise and democratic involvement of all stakeholders in governance. Although re-envisioning development governance in Nepal and exploring collaboration between development organizations and local levels poses many challenges, it presents significant opportunities for development workers, particularly social workers, to pave way for neo development governance that would benefit the most vulnerable and the marginalized in the country in a way that is way organized than ever.

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