

Social and environmental justice in foreign aid: A case study of irrigation interventions in western Nepal

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SOCIAL AND ENVIRONMENTAL JUSTICE IN FOREIGN AID: A CASE STUDY OF IRRIGATION INTERVENTIONS IN WESTERN NEPAL

Floriane Clement*, Govinda Basnet**, Fraser Sugden* and Luna Bharati*

ABSTRACT

Debates over the effectiveness of foreign aid have been recently revived both in the development sector and in the academia. International funding agencies have notably adopted new principles to improve aid delivery. Using the particular case study of a set of irrigation interventions in Western Nepal, we argue that these steps will not radically improve the pro-poor outcomes of aid interventions as long as the latter are framed in an apolitical, technical and managerial vision and discourse of development. We propose to adopt social and environmental justice as an analytical framework and vocabulary for action.

Key words: aid; irrigation; justice; institutions; discourses; western region

INTRODUCTION

The debate over how to enhance aid effectiveness is longstanding, but the discussion has been recently revived within both development and academic arenas. The recent Paris Declaration on Aid Effectiveness and Accra Agenda for Action have laid out a series of core principles which form a code of good practices to be followed by both donors and aid recipient countries. These principles (e.g. increasing

recipient's ownership or aligning aid with the recipient country's priorities) reflect the continuous search for institutional and technical refinement, a focus that has prevailed in the aid sector as the best pathway to improve aid effectiveness.

We argue that these resolutions will not radically improve the pro-poor outcomes of aid interventions as long as they are framed in an apolitical, technical and managerial vision and

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discourse of development. We choose to analyse a particular type of development intervention, irrigation projects, because these touch upon complex social-ecological systems and have been considered by donors as risky investments (Lankford, 2009), using a specific case study of a rural development programme in Nepal supported by the International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD) since 2003.

Our research draws from insights from development studies (Li, 2007; Lund, 2010; Mosse, 2005) and uses as an analytical frame the concepts of social justice (Sen, 2009) and environmental justice, which has been recently applied to developing countries (Williams and Mawdsley, 2006). The analysis shows how two different perspectives on aid interventions, one centred on technical and rational arguments, and the other explicitly addressing power relations, can lead to a different diagnosis and solution.

CONTEXT

Nepal has a long history of development interventions, with foreign aid starting in the 1950s. Aid reached up to 90% of development expenditure in 1989 (Sharma *et al.*, 2004) and still represents 26% of the national budget in 2011 (Government of Nepal - Ministry of Finance, 2012). Several studies have been

very critical of the performance of aid in Nepal, arguing that aid increased poverty and broadened social inequities (Sharma *et al.*, 2004). The Government of Nepal has been an active participant in international initiatives for aid effectiveness and was one of the original signatories of the Paris Declaration on Aid Effectiveness in 2005.

Aid delivery in Nepal offers marked challenges as the country has been qualified as 'fragile state' according to the World Bank¹ and others' definition (e.g. for DFID, see Chapman and Vaillant, 2010). A burgeoning literature on fragile states (e.g. François and Sud, 2006; Carvalho, 2006; ODI, 2011; DFID, 2005) has highlighted the greater difficulty of delivering aid in these situations and many donors have adopted specific principles to intervene in fragile countries. The definition of fragile state differs among funding agencies but usually describes states with a lack of capacity or will of the government to ensure development of its country; e.g., 'where the government cannot or will not deliver core functions to the majority of its people, including the poor' (DFID, 2005: 7); or countries which are 'characterised by weak policies, institutions, and governance' (Carvalho, 2006, p.3).

Principles to intervene in fragile states recommend that external parties be more selective and use flexible aid modalities

¹ According to the World Bank, "Fragile Situations" have: either a) a harmonized average Country Policy and Institutional Assessment (CPIA) country rating of 3.2 or less, or b) the presence of a UN and/or regional peace-keeping or peace-building mission during the past three years. Nepal qualifies in 2013 as b)

(African Development Bank and African Development Fund, 2006; Asian Development Bank, 2007) or understand the political economy and apply principles of good governance (Department for International Development, 2005) (see also OECD-DAC, 2005).

Among aid interventions, irrigation projects offer specific challenges because they target complex social-ecological systems (Cifdaloz *et al.*, 2010; Ostrom *et al.*, 2011). By complexity we mean ‘a situation where an increasing number of independent variables are interacting in interdependent and unpredictable ways’ (Sanders and McCabe, 2003, p.8). There are intrinsic factors that make irrigation systems complex. First, water is a highly variable resource with a non-linear, and therefore relatively unpredictable, behaviour. Second, water systems are multi-scalar and physically interconnected in ways which are still often poorly understood. Third, water is a common-pool resource which requires collective rules to ensure fair access and sustainable management. Lastly, water is a spiritual, religious and social resource, and its management depends on local cultural norms and values.

As well as being technologically complex, irrigation systems are characterised by a high diversity of representations and perceptions across individuals and groups. For instance, staff from the government irrigation departments might see irrigation systems as cemented infrastructures

which require technical expertise to build, operate and maintain (Udas and Zwarteveen, 2010). An economist might represent irrigation systems in terms of transaction costs for farmers to manage the system (e.g. Bhattarai, 2011). Such diverse representations have also shaped the objectives of aid interventions in multiple ways. Development projects have largely focused on increasing irrigation efficiency and agricultural productivity. However, there is ample evidence that farmers might have other objectives; e.g., women farmers’ primary concern might be to meet domestic uses with the canal irrigation system (Zwarteveen, 1998). This difference of perception and objectives among stakeholders has been at the root of the failure of external interventions to meet the needs of local water users, and particularly of the most disadvantaged groups (Vincent, 1994; Mollinga and Bolding, 2004; Turner, 1994). Some argue it is a reason why irrigation interventions have lost momentum and progressively dropped out of donors’ agendas (Lankford, 2009).

We do not pretend to provide a comprehensive analysis of foreign aid irrigation projects in Nepal but propose to explore some of the key mechanisms that create gaps between project intentions, practices and outcomes in the field within fragile states. The following sections briefly introduce the methodology. We then examine why the dominant technical representation of irrigation projects has

misled aid interventions and why donors' search for new technical and institutional models has repeatedly failed. Finally, the paper concludes with suggestions regarding possible avenues to move forward.

METHODOLOGY

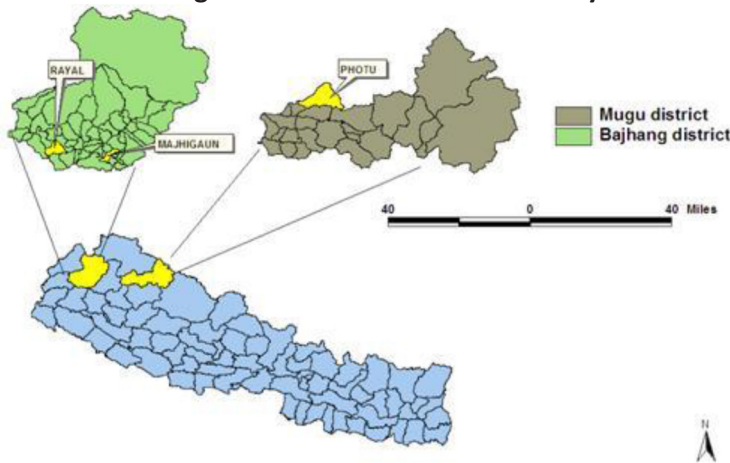
This study was part of a larger multi-country research project funded by IFAD and conducted by the International Water Management Institute (IWMI) on 'Improving Sustainability of Impacts of Agricultural Water Management Interventions in Challenging Contexts.' The research in Nepal focused on an IFAD-funded program called the Western Upland Poverty Alleviation Program (WUPAP). WUPAP has been implemented through a project coordination unit under the Ministry of Local Development (MLD) in 11 districts of the Mid-Western and Far-Western regions of Nepal. It is an 11-year project, which has, since 2003, focused on a wide range of activities for rural development, including irrigation interventions.

We selected two districts to be representative of a challenging context situation for development interventions, one in each of the two regions: Bajhang in the Far-Western region, and Mugu in the Mid-Western region. These two districts rank low in the human development index: 73rd and 75th out of 75 districts for Bajhang and Mugu respectively in the latest overall composite index calculated in 2003 (CBS Nepal and ICIMOD, 2003). Both

are characterised by low food security and food production per capita and a lack of health, education and transportation infrastructures (UNDAF, 2013b; UNDAF, 2013a). They however differ by the type of challenges for implementing irrigation interventions. Some of the key challenges in Mugu District, for instance, are the limited cultivable and irrigated area (United Nations Development Assistance Framework (UNDAF), 2013b), the absence of road and the high level of politicisation of development interventions (field observations), whereas Bajhang District, a district significantly affected by the internal armed conflict that took place in Nepal from 1996 to 2006, is characterised by a high inequality in land distribution (field observations and CBS Nepal and ICIMOD, 2003) and a high degree of land fragmentation (United Nations Development Assistance Framework (UNDAF), 2013a).

Fieldwork started with a preliminary visit led by the research team in Bajhang and Mugu districts to select the case study sites and gather basic information on livelihoods, agriculture and irrigation at the village and district level. In Bajhang, the team visited three out of six completed sites and selected two sites in two distinct Village Development Committees² (VDCs). In Mugu, there was only one WUPAP irrigation intervention completed, which the research team also visited and selected as a case study for the research (Figure 1).

² The VDC is the lowest administrative unit in Nepal

Figure 1. Location of the case study sites

In Bajhang, the two sites were selected to be representative of different types of interventions (rehabilitation of an existing system and creation of a new system) (Table 2) and of different types of social-

ecological systems (Table 1). The WUPAP intervention in Rayal VDC included three small-scale interventions in distinct wards/communities and we therefore studied it as three distinct interventions (Table 1).

Table 1. Characteristics of settlements selected as case study sites

Irrigation system	Royal	Chaudam	Pothada	Majhigaun	Gilbili
District	Bajhang	Bajhang	Bajhang	Bajhang	Mugu
VDC and ward number	Royal-1	Royal-2	Royal-2	Majhigaun-6	Photu-2
Number of households	183	103	42	145	14
Major ethnic groups	Malla, Bohara, Bhatta	Bhandari, Dalit	Bhandari	Rokaya	Brahmin, Dalit
Canal ownership	Community-owned	Privately owned	Privately owned	Community-owned	Community-owned
Main crops cultivated		Rice, wheat and corn		Rice, wheat, potato and amaranth (<i>marse</i>)	Rice, wheat, fox tail millet (<i>kaguno</i>), poroso millet (<i>chino</i>)
Accessibility	Close to dirt road linking to the district headquarters	Close to dirt road linking to the district	Close to dirt road linking to the district	A day walk from the dirt road linking to the district	No road, 2 days walk from the district headquarters

Source: Basnet, 2010

The preliminary visit was followed by two stages of 10-day and 20-day fieldwork periods in the five case study sites selected, led by one of the co-authors of this publication, an experienced Nepali anthropologist hired as a consultant for the project.

Field methods consisted of semi-structured interviews with key informants, mapping exercises, oral history of the village, life histories, focus group discussions with villagers representative of different gender, age, caste and class groups and direct field observation. It was complemented by interviews with WUPAP project staff and local district government officials; e.g., the Local Development Officer³ in both districts and with officials from the District Agricultural Development Offices, District Forest Offices and the Irrigation Development Sub-Division Office in Bajhang District.

Lastly, the lead author conducted a series of interviews with around 20 key informants, working for multilateral and bilateral donors, NGOs, government agencies, research organisations and consultancy firms, either involved in the design, implementation of irrigation development interventions in Nepal or with a renowned experience and knowledge on the topic. The interviews explored how respondents framed the challenges facing externally funded irrigation interventions in Nepal, based

on the experience of their programme or project, and how they had addressed these challenges.

FRAMING IRRIGATION INTERVENTIONS IN TERMS OF JUSTICE

The concepts of social and environmental justice offer a useful analytical frame to understand the so-called ‘successes’ and ‘failures’ of development interventions targeting social-ecological systems (Venot and Clement, 2012).

Amartya Sen has advanced utilitarianism and Rawl’s theories of social justice notably by using a different conceptualization of well-being (Sen, 2009). Sen envisions well-being as a bundle of capabilities that individuals can use to convert different means and goods into what they desire and value. Claims to rights and freedom are therefore considered as important as access to primary goods as they give people “the capability or freedom to achieve the various ‘beings’ and ‘doings’ they have reason to value” (Sen, 1999). Social justice in Sen’s perspective therefore brings power and processes to the fore by looking not only at the distribution of goods and services through fair institutions (distributive justice) but also at the capabilities citizens hold to exert political choices on the use of these goods and services (procedural justice). When applied to irrigation interventions,

³ The Local Development Officer is a civil servant, the administrative director of the District Development Committee (DDC), the local government body at the district level in Nepal.

it means that the latter should not only enhance access to water but also enhance, or at least not undermine, the rights that all water users can exercise to shape the design and implementation of these interventions.

Distributive and procedural justice form the two axes that will guide our analysis in this paper. When examining distributive justice in irrigation interventions, we will look at the outcomes of the projects, how these have been distributed among individuals and social groups, and whether the distribution of these outcomes can be considered equitable. When examining procedural justice, we will look at the processes that led to these outcomes, and more particularly whose voice can influence decision-making and whether decision-making processes are inclusive and participatory (Davies, 2006). Environmental justice offers a particular perspective on social justice through its focus on the distribution of environmental goods and bads and on environmental decision-making processes.

Another important implication of Sen's definition of well-being is the need to recognise the different perceptions that local water users might have of what is beneficial to them (Forsyth and Sikor, 2013). Assessing development projects from a justice perspective allows moving beyond a binary categorisation of interventions as 'success' and 'failure' to a more nuanced and critical understanding of what success and failure means for

different actors. 'Critical' is used here in the sense of critical realism (Forsyth, 2001), which acknowledges that our understanding of the reality is always based on a partial experience and reflects social and political framings (Forsyth, 2003). We will also examine who is defining what 'benefits' mean for different stakeholders.

CASE STUDY

Project assessment

In the second phase of WUPAP (2007-2011), around 470 infrastructures were implemented, benefiting a reported total of over 29,600 households within which around 40% benefited from irrigation schemes. As expected, the assessment of WUPAP exhibited lower rates of performance for irrigation structures compared with other types of infrastructures such as school, health facilities or roads (IFAD, 2011). The joint review mission conducted by IFAD at the end of 2011 made the following diagnosis for this low performance. First, there was a high variability in the quality of the structures because the latter 'have been designed by insufficiently experienced staff and without adequate technical supervision during construction' (IFAD, 2011). Second, the mission indicated that: 'the focus of the infrastructure activities has been heavily biased towards construction with insufficient attention to appropriate community-led operation and maintenance (O&M) arrangements' (IFAD, 2011).

Our fieldwork also evidenced technical defects related to poor design among one of the five irrigation interventions surveyed (Table 2). Furthermore, in all sites, the role of the user groups formed

by the project to construct, operate and maintain the canal remained limited to that of a construction committees and the groups quickly became dysfunctional after the works were completed (Basnet, 2011).

Table 2. Outcomes of WUPAP irrigation interventions in the five case studies (Basnet 2010, 2011).

Irrigation system	Royal	Chaudam	Pothada	Majhigaun	Gilbili
District	<i>Bajhang</i>	<i>Bajhang</i>	<i>Bajhang</i>	<i>Bajhang</i>	<i>Mugu</i>
Type of AWM intervention	Rehabilitation, cement lining	Rehabilitation, cement lining	Rehabilitation, cement lining	New irrigation system, pipe lining	Rehabilitation, cement lining
Major challenge	Work abandoned because of an alleged misuse of fund	Existing landslide downstream the rehabilitation work	Work abandoned because of dispute over water rights and misuse of funds	Work not completed as designed because of a lack of fund	Regular small landslides
Current status of intervention	Not completed but improved sections function well	Rehab work made little change	Functioning well, small section damaged by land slide	No drainage system, settlement gets flooded	Small landslides damaged the canal
Change in water flow after the intervention	Significantly increased	Negligible	Increased	Increased	Increased

The conclusions reached by IFAD's joint review mission and our research are thus very similar. Our argument is that a critical factor hindering aid effectiveness lies in the particular way of identifying and framing problems, which is rooted in a technical and managerial vision of

development. The following section examines the two main issues discussed above⁴: construction quality and sustainability, first from the perspective adopted by IFAD, which is typical of aid agencies, and second from a social and environmental justice angle.

⁴ Fieldwork in the case study area and interviews of development practitioners in Kathmandu highlighted other challenges faced by the project and by aid in general in Nepal, related to state fragility: e.g., the lack of local elected representatives, the high politicisation of development projects or the delays in decision-making in Ministries. Because of space limitation, we did not address these issues in this paper.

Construction quality

Framing problems

The reasons identified by the IFAD joint review mission for the high occurrence of technical defects were a lack of technical capacity among project staff and a lack of supervision during the construction phase. A lack of technical capacity at the district and project levels was indeed evident in terms of design and implementation and irregular check-ups during the construction phase (pers. comm., WUPAP project coordinator, January 2012). These are real capacity and institutional problems, but looking at the issue from a procedural justice perspective, a more critical issue is the lack of accountability to aid 'beneficiaries'.

In one of the case study settlements, Majhigaun, part of the fields have been regularly flooded after the intervention was left uncompleted, because no drainage system was built. Subsequent requests of the community to complete the irrigation system have not been met because the maximum amount per intervention allowed by the project had been already spent. The community has no means to influence WUPAP or IFAD to complete their irrigation system.

The word 'accountability' is significantly absent from the project documents reviewed. The few instances where the word appears (3 times among 15 documents, including project

reports and appraisal) refer to upward accountability (to the funding agency) but not to downward accountability (to aid recipients). At the time the interventions were implemented, there was hardly any mechanism built in the program to make the chairperson and secretary of the committee (acting *de facto* more as a contractor), the social mobilisers, the WUPAP Project Coordination Unit, or IFAD staff accountable to the water users. The main forms of accountability mechanisms in place within WUPAP are tools which tend to be extractive and top-down evaluations methods such as mid-term reviews, supervision missions, joint review missions and independent evaluations.

Another weakness related to procedural justice which is characteristic not only of WUPAP but also of most irrigation programmes (Ostrom *et al.*, 2011) is that only one source and form of knowledge has been considered in the design of the irrigation schemes—that of engineers. This situation results in an unequal power relationship in which the project technical experts are the knowledge holders and local people are solely aid recipients (Pradhan, 2012). In the case of irrigation systems, engineering has tended to favour cemented lined canals as these are believed to be more robust and more efficient. This focus on hardware and cement has however not been dictated by engineers but has also been expected and requested by water users. For many

rural men and women in Nepal, fixed infrastructures embody development and farmers do demand cement works for their canal improvement based upon these perceptions. As noted by Li (1999), development projects are rarely unilaterally imposed but rather the result of a compromise between the aid organisations and the local people involved in the project participation process. At play here is an ideological and pervasive form of power which shapes people's own vision of their well-being.

Traditional irrigation systems have had marked advantages over totally lined structures. First, they have shown a high sustainability because the regularity and low cost of their maintenance has provided incentives to farmers to cooperate to repair them over long periods of time (Lam, 1998). Second, in the harsh biophysical context of Nepal, recent research findings indicate that cemented irrigation systems do not provide a lasting technical efficiency (Ostrom *et al.*, 2011).

In one of the case studies, farmers had warned the project staff of recurrent landslides, but, as in many so-called 'participatory approaches', there was no opportunity to integrate their knowledge into the design of the intervention and their 'participation' was confined to labour contribution. The newly rehabilitated section of the canal was damaged by a landslide a few months later. Farmers in the case study sites in both Bajhang and Mugu districts were

not able to repair the damaged cemented structures because of a lack of knowledge and high cost. Another issue raised by the Local Development Officer (LDO) of Mugu district is that farmers prefer to wait for the next project to fund the repair rather than to do themselves – the common project dependency syndrome often experienced in foreign aid projects (Gibson *et al.*, 2005; Araral, 2005).

Integrating local knowledge also includes understanding local culture.

Addressing problems

The issue of construction quality was framed in IFAD's joint review mission as a capacity and institutional problem. As a result, IFAD's response was to recruit engineers to conduct an independent audit of all the structures and rehabilitate those deemed defunct (IFAD, 2011). This kind of solution can ensure that damaged structures get fixed, but if the two issues of procedural justice discussed previously are not addressed, this will be only a short term fix. For instance, how will communities and individuals ensure that the engineering audit and rehabilitation process responds to their needs? Such measures need to be coupled with devolving the necessary power to the aid beneficiaries to make aid providers accountable to them and modifying the current power-knowledge relations so that knowledge of the aid beneficiaries is valued. In this sense, the social audits that WUPAP has recently initiated mark a

positive move towards power devolution, as long as it is not a mere administrative exercise and actually combines technical-managerial evaluation tools with empowerment processes (Ebrahim, 2003).

Sustainability, ownership and institutions

Framing problems

IFAD diagnosed the poor sustainability of the structures as resulting from a lack of institutional arrangements for O&M and a lack of ownership by the community. In this view, the problem is perceived as rooted in the community and is to be fixed by designing a new institutional template into the project to better mobilise aid beneficiaries.

Such templates are often ill-adapted to effectively manage complex social-ecological systems such as irrigation canals (Meinzen-Dick, 2007). WUPAP, as with most development programs in Nepal, proposes the following institutional blueprint: first, local people are 'mobilised' to form community organisations (COs) which act as savings and micro-credit groups. The members of the COs make a demand to get funding, e.g. regarding the rehabilitation or expansion of their irrigation system, and then a functional organisation (FO) is

formed to manage the irrigation system. For each FO, a chairperson, secretary and treasurer are appointed. Although COs and FOs are said to be inclusive because all water users are members, the chair positions, who hold the decision-making power, are often captured by the local elite, sometimes with the support of the project's social mobiliser, because of the opportunities for generating income that they offer. Most villagers in the study sites believe that the main objectives of the chairpersons are to draw extra benefits from the project funds (Basnet, 2011). As the key office bearers of FOs are perceived to be guided by their own vested interest, they therefore hold very little legitimacy. This issue related to distributive justice is likely to affect sustainability, as leadership is a key factor for the long term performance of irrigation structures (Ostrom *et al.*, 2011).

What is more, the institutional template of the project consisting of COs and FOs, has often ignored existing local institutions.⁵ One intervention in Pothada, Bajhang was left uncompleted because conflicts around existing local water rights had not been adequately addressed by the project (Basnet, 2010). In the case study sites, newly created FOs have not considered customary institutional arrangements for managing irrigation water, for instance, the existence of a *kulalo* (in Bajhang)

⁵ An institution is understood here to refer to formal or informal rules-in-use, norms and strategies. In the case of community-based institutions related to canal irrigation systems, it refers to e.g. written or tacit rules on water allocation among water users, on the selection of persons who are contributing to maintenance works and their level of contribution, etc.

or *seralo* (in Mugu), an individual who allocates water among users in return for an in kind payment in grain, neither have they considered local water rights in Pothada, Bajhang, which ultimately forced WUPAP to stop the intervention. Lastly, the members of the COs and FOs were not involved in the design of the interventions and a large majority of them felt that the function of the FO was limited to implement the construction works – not to manage the O&M of the structures.

Although customary institutions might have their own flaws – and might not be inclusive or representative – the maintenance of irrigation structures is more likely to function under institutions perceived as legitimate.

Addressing problems

IFAD identified the lack of sustainability of the irrigation structures as a weakness in their institutional model of participation. The proposed ‘remedy’ was greater community mobilisation: “the social audit should be followed-up by community mobilisation to establish a community-led O&M system including appropriate financial arrangements” (IFAD, 2012). However, it is unclear how this process of greater community mobilisation will overcome previous shortcomings as long as issues of representation, downward accountability and recognition of customary knowledge and institutions are not addressed. Recent research shows that, more than ‘mobilising’ communities,

what matters for sustaining the operation and maintenance of externally-rehabilitated irrigation infrastructures are the active involvement of water users in the design of the rehabilitation and the quality and legitimacy of the leaders of these water user organisations (Ostrom *et al.*, 2011), that is to say, more than just institutions. The next section will discuss how social and environmental justice can be better integrated into development projects.

JUSTICE AND AID EFFECTIVENESS

The practices of aid observed in WUPAP were similarly observed in four other IFAD programmes implemented in Burkina Faso, Ethiopia, Ghana and Sri Lanka which were studied as part of a larger research project (Merrey, 2012). These starkly contrast with some of IFAD’s discourses at the international level, for instance IFAD’s monitoring and evaluation manual, published a decade ago:

The thinking behind development is constantly evolving. Many projects used to focus on expert input to design infrastructure (...). Over time, attention has moved towards more participation of primary stakeholders in project design and towards strategies that build capacity and empower people to direct and manage their own development ideas (...) The idea of blueprint planning has given way to more flexible, process-oriented and adaptive approaches to project implementation (IFAD, 2002, pp.1-15).

Such gaps between discourses and practices are not at all specific to IFAD. Whereas all international agencies have integrated concepts of empowerment, equity and participation in their discourses, the latter have lost their original political⁶ content and on the ground aid delivery has been driven by a technical managerial vision of aid and development (Cornwall and Eade, 2010; Bebbington *et al.*, 2007; Campbell, 2010). For instance, most respondents from funding and implementing agencies in Kathmandu perceived aid delivery in Nepal as challenging because of delays in project implementation, increased costs and, as a whole, slow financial and physical progress. Very few respondents commented on social inclusion, fairness and equity issues, which however have been largely documented in academic studies on small-scale irrigation systems in Nepal (Ostrom *et al.*, 2011; Pradhan, 2012; Yoder and Martin, 1998; Basnet, 2005).

Our analysis evidenced that the dominant solution advocated to fix what has been perceived as technical-managerial problems has been to refine the 'project model' by creating 'better' institutions: for instance, refining the model of social mobilisation. The rationale is that the right model and institutional arrangements will lead to successful projects. Institutions are indeed key components of projects as they shape actors' interactions and create

or transform the set of incentives that influence their decisions. Yet institutions hold another important function: to modify the power distribution among individuals and groups of stakeholders. For instance, there is a tacit norm in most development projects to hold community meetings in a public space, which can deter women's participation under some social and cultural settings because of prevailing gender norms (Mosse, 1994). In our case study, because the problems have been framed as technical and managerial issues, the institutional refinement proposed does not aim at challenging existing power distribution between project staff and targeted households but at meeting project targets. In the case of WUPAP, these targets, according to which field staff performance is evaluated, are framed as technical-managerial objectives, such as number of COs formed, percentage of women in the CO, which tell little about social and environmental justice, e.g. whether the women in the COs can influence decision-making.

Many foreign aid projects have similarly used institutional design as a tool to fulfil technical-managerial objectives such as organising a community meeting, but not as a mechanism to address or challenge existing power distribution among project stakeholders, such as creating opportunities for the most disadvantaged to build their capabilities, including self-confidence (Mosse, 2005).

⁶ By 'political', we mean here which has the potential to influence power distribution

With this paper, we aimed at initiating a reflection on the relevance to use the concepts of social and environmental justice as an analytical frame and vocabulary of action that bring back fairness and power distribution to the fore in how we understand and assess aid effectiveness. Our case study findings support the inclusion of justice as an overarching objective as important as organisational objectives.

Adopting the concept of 'justice' in development discourses might however not be sufficient to change project processes and outcomes. 'Justice' might, as 'participation' or 'empowerment', become a new aid buzzword and lose its original meaning. Such a process, in which politically and socially-engaged concepts become lofty and ambiguous, is often necessary at the stage of project design to bring multiple actors together and make them agree on the forms and direction of social change (Cornwall and Brock, 2005). But there are windows for change at the field level, notably by deconstructing the meanings of these concepts and making their political content more explicit to those who implement projects on the ground. Yet this is likely to be insufficient when strong incentives gear projects away from the officially stated objectives (poverty reduction, food security, etc.) to achieve organisational objectives (spend money, show outcomes to the board, etc.) (Mosse, 2005). Justice as a vocabulary of action needs to be coupled with justice

as an operational analytical frame for evaluating aid effectiveness within M&E systems of aid agencies.

Developing a way to decompose distributive and procedural justice into indicators that could inform project design and feed into the M & N system of funding agencies would need further research, but we can acknowledge the steps that bilateral donors and NGOs have made in promoting social justice in their programmes. For example, some have recognised the diversity of individuals' capabilities and needs within a community and adopted an affirmative approach targeting the most marginalised or conducted social audits whereby local people's voices can really influence project implementation. Considering the additional resources and efforts that such initiatives entail, donors might find it difficult to defend such approaches in times of budget restrictions. A first step in such settings would be to set modest and realistic objectives to ensure quality of outcomes and impacts. A common critique of the IFAD programmes reviewed in the five countries by this research project was their promotion of over-ambitious goals and objectives articulated by the organisation which did not adequately address the political, institutional and social contexts prevailing in each country.

A justice-oriented approach to aid would aim at giving local people more power and control over the means through which they can improve their livelihoods, where

the role of the funding agency would be limited to responding and supporting individual and collective initiatives. There is certainly no panacea and any intervention needs to be adapted to the national and local contexts, but to give an example, it could take the form of service centres where technical or marketing advices, loans, and subsidised inputs can be accessible to all on a long-term basis, with a special support for marginalised groups. Such an approach however is ill adapted to a project mode and would require fundamental changes in the type of incentives that prevail among aid organisational systems.

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