



Rural Infrastructure in Nepal: A Critical Scrutiny

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Abstract

The objective of this paper is to analyse the role of rural infrastructure in the development of Nepal. Secondary data collected from various sources have been used retrieving them from different publications of government departments, engineering institutes and libraries besides other demonstrated materials from different researches of rural infrastructures programmes. The finding of this paper is that developmental programmes that focus on the rural location play a vital role in the development of Nepal. Some works related to rural infrastructures had been implemented and some works are being processed for implementation in the future.

Key words: Infrastructure, rural, urban, development, strategy

Introduction

Rural development, generally understood, is the development taken up to reduce various difference between regions in the countryside in terms of social, cultural and economic progress. It focuses on catering to a variety of needs of the people including those of the basic civic amenities such as roads, market access, hospital, schools, communication etc. It also focuses on raising the economic capacity of the people in the rural areas by creating means of income generation and raising the standard of the life of the people. In order to do the same, rural development aspires to make the villages self-reliant and thus stop the migration of the people to the urban spaces or to countries abroad.

In many countries in the less developed regions of the world, development of the sustainable infrastructure remains a big problem. It is plain and simple that people in the rural areas cannot experience the fruit of development unless they have access to such amenities of development as mentioned above. The development of such infrastructure and ensuring the access of the people to it is what rural development in sum is.

Many government and development partners across the world tend to use local resources as far as practicable and make the rural stake-holders a part of development, believing that such participatory developmental approach ensures more sustainability and belongingness. Development of rural roads, for example, can be taken up by amalgamating the most recent road-construction technology and material such as bitumen from urban space, while the physical labour used for the purpose can be hired from the local communities. This not only increases the sense of ownership but also enhances people's income by providing job and work opportunities. Rural infrastructure, after all, is inevitable and must to bring changes to the overall economic status of the people, which in turn will have formidable impacts on the quality of life people in

the rural areas live. The target regions obviously will have better means of livelihood. If this happens, many existing problems including under-development and poverty can be easily mitigated and people can be escorted towards better present and future.

Generally speaking, the private sector is found to be rather reluctant in entering the rural landscape with development scheme. The reasons are obviously. Development itself is quite arduous and expensive in the rural areas and the output is not always speedy or certain. In that case, private sector that hinges on quick and cocksure income may not find rural development an alluring domain of engagement. Since risk factors are many, they do not usually side with development projects in the countryside. For this reason, as is seen everywhere around the globe, rural development is solely a burden of the public sector, either the government or the community of the beneficiaries. The reasons is that the public sector acts not as a business foundation but as a guardian to the people, and guardians do not usually seek quick returns for their investment as it is a part of their responsibility towards their dependents. This does not mean the private sector has no stake in rural development. It certainly does (Ostrom et al., 1993).

The mass of the rural people, who more or less remain away from the benefits of development, can be pulled into the frame of developmental benefits through the development of rural infrastructure. For a test case, we can imagine agriculture. Farmers, who can produce huge quantities of crops and other agricultural products in the rural areas using their own traditional means and methods of family cannot sell their products if there are no good roads, no vehicles and no access to the market. This limits their entry into the market and bars them from partaking of the competition in the market, thereby hampering not only their income but also their confidence in agriculture. If that happens, people will either be obliged to leave their occupation and choose something else, or live their villages and migrate elsewhere. In both the cases, the life of the rural communities will be affected. To stop this from happening, it is imminent for the state, community or individuals to focus on the development of the most imminent rural infrastructure like roads.

The term development is not merely limited to concrete entities like physical infrastructure. It also pertains to intangible things like concepts and ideas. Both physical and ideational resources work together to ensure the development of a region and both need supporting infrastructure to function at their best.

Like road that is crucial to physical development, things like communication and access to knowledge and information are crucial for ideational development. Both play a very important role in the development of a rural landscape (Srivastava 1992). As economy advances towards growth and development, the linkage of the rural localities with the rest part of the country or the world at large becomes a must, and in that case, improved facilities of transport, communication and other amenities become crucial to enhance the homogenizing tendencies of the present time by creating a “planet reduced to village size” (Hoggart & Henry 1987). Many scholars who analyse the society comment that replacing the horizontal pace of development with its vertical counterpart more or less comprises the trajectory of development in the rural areas. This is to say flat or isolated development is not enough; development should ensure connectedness in order to enhance the movement of goods and ideas.

Accessibility is another important element we need to consider while discussing rural development. Accessibility, however, differs from place to place. Development of the necessary infrastructure in the villages is characterised by small investment scattered over a small land area,

but such pocket-size investments are many and scattered over many places, making sure that the overall area covered by such numerous development projects becomes quite wide. If the management authority has the necessary know-how in terms of technology and is equipped with all the necessary materials needed for the purpose, it can effectively plan and materialize the development project.

Let us take road construction as an example. Development of roads is, no doubt, one of the most necessary aspect of rural development infrastructure and in constructing roads, the concerned constructors usually prepared a road intensity index which to some extent presents a realistic picture and possible accessibility potential of the planned road. If both the probabilities are high, the constructors can immediately take up the project and can be quite sure about their success. Because, in that case the utility and accessibility of the road becomes higher for the local people (Singh, 1999). Development of health infrastructure in the rural areas is another similar case. People in the countryside are most often seen travelling to far-off places to avail medical services, including the sub-specialist and specialist services because the basic may also be available to them in their own locations. If their grievances are to be adequately addressed, they need to be made available easy, affordable and easily accessible health services not far away from their locations of living. If the service provider is located at a distance, it hampers the people. On top of that, scanty transportation facilities in the rural areas impede the public from available optimal medical services.

Rural societies have some discernable characteristics. The countryside often has a huge population of elderly people, suffering from chronic medical conditions. Such people might require many visits to the hospitals. When transportation facilities are scarce and their incomes are meagre, people face a lot of hardship. Lack of knowledge about basic medical and physiological conditions and health issues may further aggravate their plight. Under-education and poverty often aggravate such conditions.

People in the villages usually know each other quite well. Taboos and stigmas, therefore, work like plague there. If there are confidential issues, their leakage lead to social defamation and so, many times, people tend to hide their problems. This poses a lot of danger on the part of the patient if the problem is health-related. Issues concerning sexual and reproductive health, for example, are cases in which the patients do not open up and continue to suffer.

Therefore, there are various factors that problematize health services in the rural community. Health education and provision of immediate, affordable and regular health care, therefore, is another extremely crucial part of rural development. Besides development health care centres and hospital, the government and other stakeholders should also work on the softer side of development, like educating the mass, repelling the fear of stigma from their mind and urging them to consult doctors even if minor issues pop up. In addition to this, if arrangements like affiliation with larger systems or networks, like tele-medicine and on-line health services are made, and efforts to improve the work places are undertaken, we can hope that rural health condition can be improved by a great degree.

Education, like transport and health, is another very important aspect of rural development. This can have multiple impacts. It not only makes people conscious, rational and aware of their essence, position and potential, it also enhances their employment potential, entrepreneurship and income, and by doing so, change the standard of their life positively. Findings of certain researches indicate that even basic education overwhelmingly affects small

landholders and subsistence farmers by influencing their yield in the affirmative. It is found that a farmer with primary education can produce 8.7 percent more than his counterpart who is totally uneducated. Farmers, who have acquired more education, has no limit to their yields, as they are careful, innovative and more knowledgeable than others, and they can even use modern agricultural resources and technologies. Education plus skill-enhancement training to rural farmers can ensure a huge leap in productivity as well as life standard (Gasperini, 2000b, p.1). Other infrastructures are also challenging and important for the development of rural areas. The subsequent sections of this paper will analyse the role of the aforementioned rural infrastructure in the development of Nepal.

Theoretical Review

Recent progresses in rural development are issues that have been greatly discussed all over the world, both in the academic and outside, including in the governments or at the level of the public. Both nature of the development and its outcomes has been brought under the purview of analysis and scrutiny. Agricultural development, fundamentally focused on the rural areas vis-à-vis its relation with diversified economic activities (Van der Ploeg et al., 2005; OECD, 2006). It can, however, be argued that the pace of economic growth and social changed, in whatever degree it has taken place, is quite steady in the rural areas, as observed over a long period of time. Because rural areas are still largely unexplored and untouched, they can be new and exciting locations for development enthusiasts who want to open up newer avenues of economic activities like extending information and communication services or establishing new agricultural firms that increase employment opportunities (Keeble & Tylor, 1998). If this happens, the burden of overpopulation and the negative impacts thereof can be decrease, as much of the same can shift towards rural locations. The coming in of such newer modes of development can change the erstwhile economic identity of the villages that used to be limited to agriculture, animal husbandry and things like that. Even if they are retain, they can assume newer modes with the advent of modern methods, means and technology. Because the rural area offers a myriad of new possibilities and circumstances, the stereotypical understanding of the term ‘rural’ either becomes misleading or can be rapidly changed (Hodge & Monk, 2004).

Methodology

This study is based on secondary data. Publications of rural infrastructure development programme under the local development ministry, research papers of institute of engineering and papers of different research institutes were used.

Findings and Discussions

Like elsewhere in the world, rural development in Nepal also is a complex process, which at once involves interaction on multiple avenues: economic, social, political, education and cultural aspects. Rural development basically hinges on the singular motif to improve the standard of the life of the people living in the rural areas and to do the same, it lays stress on the development of the necessary physical and ideational infrastructure. Besides the development of infrastructure, it also entails remodelling of agricultural both in terms of yield and its commercialization, optimum use, resource mobilization, security of food, generation of jobs,

increases access to health-care activities, inclusive social development, and the overall upliftment of the society.

In case of Nepal, intense focus of rural development started in 1956 but the outcomes are still debatable and demand a lot of scrutiny and discussion. We have not yet been assess the outcomes of rural development because such researches have not been conducted. Moreover, the institutions who are expected to take the initiatives and manage the resources necessary for the purpose (Pyakural, 1980, p. 27). Different programmes directed at the development of rural infrastructure like Agricultural Road Programme, District Road Support Programme, Rural Infrastructure Work, Rural Infrastructure Development Programme, Poverty Alleviation Project, Remote Specific Area Development Programme etc. have been taken up. After 1951, many of such initiatives have been taken up. Through the Block Development Officer, many of such plans were implemented in the rural communities (Adhikari, 1982). The Panchayat Development Programme was launched in the 1960s, and its major objectives for change and development were three: institutional development, social mobilization and related change.

The pace of development, however, is quite slow in the countryside, as compared to the same in the urban space. This is quite obvious. People in the villages are comparatively less educated, and have little or no access to health, electricity, transport and communication resources. Similarly, Dalits, women, people from marginal communities and ethnic societies, the Madhesis, or people with one or another kind of disability have very low access of basic human requirements. Moreover, the increasing trend of poverty is not the same everywhere. It needs to be seen if this is an outcome of irrelevant development initiatives or unstable politics. We need to direct out research in that direction.

Despite such imbalance, Nepalese rural economy is perking up and is progressing smoothly. The government has conducted special programmes for increasing opportunities in rural areas for the betterment of rural infrastructure. Programmes that generate income for the entire community should be implemented. The Government of Nepal has taken several initiatives to ensure the development of the rural areas. The first sets of programmes include physical infrastructure development. The second set of programme address include remote area development where the most important and necessary plans formulated in consultation with the beneficiaries. The third ones are those classed under 'Integrated Rural Development Programme', where the Gulmi Project, Arghakhanchi Project, Gorkha Project, Dhading Project, Seti Project, Lamjung Project and the Karnali Project were launched. The Fourth programme is titled 'Increasing Access of the Poor to the Productive Resources' and the fifth and the final one is "Programmes for the Backward Communities" implemented in 21 districts, especially directed towards the development of the Chepangs, Musahars, Jhagads, Dhums, Chamars, Dusads and Sattars. The programmes include schemes for the development of the underprivileged communities.

Operating under the Local Self-Government Act 2055, many local governments are also formulating and implementing rural development planes. Nepal Government's Local Infrastructure Development Policy 2061 is basically inclined towards empowering the local governments to hone rural development programmes with priority. Ministry of Local Development is the central agency for overseeing such projects. The central, provincial and local government, acting as three tiers of governance in the country are putting their efforts in all possible ways and the future of rural development in Nepal appears extremely bright. In addition,

the rural municipalities, and municipalities (including metropolitan and sub-metropolitan counsels) and District Coordination Committees are shouldering the task at the local level. Thus, rural development has started becoming an issue of central concern for the Government of Nepal, and this has created a lot of hope and belief.

Conclusion

In the context of Nepal rural infrastructure programme plays an important role in the development of the nation. In the context of the rural infrastructure of Nepal rural education, rural health, rural communication, and rural transportation have not been developed to the standard the country needs. It may be due geographical bottlenecks, lack of funds, political instability and other reasons. Establishment of rural infrastructure development programme as a wing under the Ministry of Local Development somehow shows that rural development is in the top of the list of the priorities of Nepal Government. Hence Nepal Government, political parties, policy makers and all the stake-holders should pay attention towards rural infrastructure development in the nation. Rural development should also be developed as an integral part of technical education which is quite necessary for Nepal.

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