

Impact of Non-Governmental Organizations in the Rural Community Development: A Case Study from the Trans-Himalayan Region of Nepal

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Abstract Non-governmental organizations (NGOs) are recognized as important institutional actors in mobilizing community assets, motivating people and implementing social welfare programs effectively at the grassroots level. This paper investigates the impact of NGOs on the community development strategy in Tangting, one of the underprivileged rural communities in the trans-Himalayan region of Nepal. The survey findings revealed that NGOs opened the door for developmental activities in the village. Prior to involvement of NGOs, villagers were deprived from basic rights such as education, social, health, economic and political opportunities. Disparity between genders, and caste were also high and tenacious in Tangting. Nevertheless, after the involvement of NGOs in the region, the livelihood strategies of the locals changed significantly. Villagers had access to reliable drinking water facilities, electricity and modern communication mediums. Informal education was conducted for illiterate women and the occupational castes were also encouraged to participate in the campaign. Moreover, NGOs created livelihood opportunities for villagers by empowering illiterate women group and disadvantaged groups.

Keywords Agriculture, Disadvantaged Groups, Hunting, Livelihood, Livestock, Poverty

1. Introduction

The people based non-governmental organizations (NGOs) taking part in the development process is a new phenomenon in Nepal, which came into effects after replacement of Nepal's Panchayat regime (Monarchy system) in favor of a more open and liberal democracy and economy by a multi-party system in 1990[1,2]. After the restoration of democracy in the country, common people had access to political power and resources, and also brought the Nepali economy closer to the outside world and resulted in greater integration with global markets[3].

The newly elected democratic government (in 1990) opened space for private institutions and NGOs to embrace greater responsibility for development, local governance reforms, decentralization, and economic reforms in order to eliminate the deep-rooted social inequalities, insecurity, corruption, discrimination and a crisis of governance in the country[2,3]. After parliamentary democracy was restored in Nepal, the state government changed the funding regulations

for NGOs, and they were recognized as an important institutional actor for mobilizing community assets, motivating people, and implementing social welfare programs effectively at grass-roots level[4-6]. As a result, the number of registered NGOs skyrocketed in Nepal. By the end of August 2010, approximately 30,284 NGOs and 191 international-NGOs (INGOs) that are registered at Social Welfare Council (SWC), are effectively working in Nepal[7].

Moreover, NGOs are encouraged to work in underprivileged groups and communities, especially in isolated and remote areas[8]. Additionally, the Tenth plan (2002/03-2006/07) also prioritized the role of NGOs with the broader concept of civil society for advocating agendas of oppressed and exploited communities (such as dalits, minorities of the ethnic communities, disable people) and make them aware about their rights[9,10]. Such governmental strategy and provision broadens the working space of NGOs particularly in resource mobilization, social mobilization, awareness, skill development and rehabilitation[8,10].

Given a situation of faster growing number of social organizations in Nepal, all sources admit that both NGOs and INGOs are genuinely dedicated to improving the social welfare of their target populations and establishing good governance[1,8]. However, in some circumstances the governance of NGOs also appears to be challenging as the wide

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distrust persists between the government and NGOs due to lack of understanding of each other's role[6,8]. The success and failure of NGOs is linked to good governance as their roles and responsibilities are greatly affected by financial and technical capacity, management capacity, commitment, political and socio-cultural dimensions[11].

The chronic rural poverty is persistent among the mountainous dwellers as it is inextricably linked to lack of accessibility[12]. People living in the mountain ecology have less access to social services, markets, education, health, energy and other economic activities[12]. Additionally, disparity between genders and caste/ethnicities are also high and tenacious in Nepal[13,14]. Therefore, the main objective of this paper was to investigate the impact of NGOs in Tangting, one of the remote and underprivileged communities in the trans-Himalayan region, Nepal. The study draws data collected through rural household surveys and key informant interviews in the village.

2. Research Methodology

Study site: Tangting is a beautiful traditional Gurung¹ village which is located on the southern belt of the Annapurna Conservation Area Project (ACAP) (on the bases of mount Annapurna II and LamjungHimal). The Gurungs are the predominant ethnic group living in the Annapurna region[15]. It lies in the Namarjung Village Development Committee (VDC) of Kaski and is approximately 24 km away from Pokhara, the district headquarter of the Western Development Region of Nepal. It is about 1665 m above the sea level and has a minimum air temperature of about 5°C in winter (Dec-Feb) and a maximum air temperature of about 30°C in summer (April-Aug). Altogether there are 200 households in the village with more than 1,200 inhabitants. Gurungs are the main habitants in Tangting in which 80% of the households are occupied by Gurung while remaining households belong to other occupational castes or dalits² including Kami (7%), Damai (6%) and Sarki (7%).

Data collection: A reasonable and efficient research strategy for differentiating impacts of NGOs on rural livelihoods will be to compare the living conditions or standard before and after the involvement of NGOs with respect to activities that have important implications on livelihood activities including social services, health, education, household incomes, resource use behavior and resource

extraction technologies. The data and information quoted in this paper is mainly based on the lifetime experience of one of the authors, who have been living in the studied area for more than 30 years. Additional data were also collected through a field survey by employing in-depth household questionnaire interviews and key informant interview.

Prior to the primary data collection, one of the authors interacted with youth group, women group (especially mothers' party), community leaders, and VDC officials in order to get acquainted (with the local communities of Tangting) and to explain goals of the research. In-depth household interviews were carried out by employing a self-administered questionnaire survey to evaluate the efficacy of the relationship between rural livelihoods and NGOs. Questionnaires were prepared in Nepali language, however, the Gurung language was used to ask the questions. A total of 120 households (comprising 60% of the total) were randomly selected during the period of February-April 2011. In most of the cases, the questionnaire was asked to the household heads (which were mostly male). The questionnaire consisted of four parts: (i) demographic structure such as caste, gender, family member, and occupation; (ii) agriculture and numbers of livestock; (iii) socio-economic information such as health, education, annual income and sources of income, and (iv) the impacts of NGOs and their activities.

Similarly, elicited detailed qualitative data about rural livelihood experiences were also collected through informal, loosely structured, and open-ended interviews. A total of 10 key informants were selected from a range of categories in order to represent the broad interests and perspectives in studied communities. The interviewed key informants were: local entrepreneurs, school-teachers, youth leaders, mother's leaders, VDC secretary of Tangting, and elderly community members.

3. Results

3.1. Livelihood Strategies in Tangting before the Involvement of NGOs

Predominantly, agriculture was the main source of subsistence, often supplemented by animal husbandry and other livelihood activities including hunting, bee keeping, fishing, alcohol production, weaving clothes and sacks from the wild nettle plant, and weaving various bamboo products, such as wooden threshers, mats, baskets and so on. On the basis of elevation, the agricultural patterns have been classified into lowland (at 1,000m or below) and highland agricultural areas (above 1,000m). Highland agricultural area is generally called *Bari* (non-irrigated land) and mainly used for cultivating cereals including maize, millet, barley, and wheat. On the other hand, lowland agricultural area is called *Khet* or *Beshi* (irrigated land) and mainly rice is harvested, which is the main staple food for the villagers. Villagers heavily relied on rain-fed agriculture and hence, all cereals were cultivated

¹The Gurung people are an ethnic group of Nepal's mountain valleys. They live primarily in north-west Nepal of Gandaki Zone, specifically Lamjung, Kaski, Mustang, Dolpa, Tanahu, Gorkha, Parbat, and Syangja districts as well as the Manang district around the Annapurna mountain range. For full detail of the Gurung people please see Macfarlane & Gurung, 1992.

²Dalit is a self-designation for a group of people traditionally regarded as untouchables in the society. Historically dalit has often been associated with occupations regarded as ritually impure, such as any involving leatherwork, butchering, blacksmith and removal of rubbish, and works as manual laborers in Nepal. Discrimination against dalits still exists in rural areas of Nepal and are not allowed to access to eating places, temples and water sources. For more detail please see Dahal *et al.*, 2002.

only one time per year. Paddy, maize, and millet were cultivated during summer whereas barley and wheat were cultivated in winter seasons. These crops were supplemented with pulses including various kinds of lentils and small beans. Usually, these supplementary crops were sown along the raised banks between the fields. Additionally, they grew potatoes, taro, and vegetables to fulfill their basic diet. The farming was at or below the subsistence level and most of the crops were consumed at the household level.

Tangting is influenced by the patriarchal society of Nepal and thus, males and females hold different social and economic roles. Women were responsible for most of the household activities including cooking, fetching water, collecting firewood and fodder, and grinding grains. Similarly, men were responsible for outdoor activities such as hunting, fishing, pastoralism and farming to secure their livelihood. In addition, men were involved in seasonal out-migration, especially as a military in India and United Kingdom (UK). Women were not allowed to plough the field even though they are capable of doing so. However, Gurungs have traditionally not worked as blacksmiths or goldsmiths. Thus, all agricultural tools including hoe, spade, sickle, and plough were locally made by blacksmith (Kami). Clothes and shoes were sewed by Damai and Sarki, respectively in the village. In return the occupational groups were offered grain or sometimes cash as labor wage.

Historically, Gurungs of Tangting were animal herders, and depended on large herds of cattle and flocks of sheep and goats. Usually, a Gurung household was considered wealthy depending on the number of livestock they have. Two dominant forms of pastoralism were observed in Tangting: transhumance and village based pastoralism. Transhumance, characterized by the long seasonal movement of livestock between different but complementary ecological zones was a key grazing pattern in Tangting. Types of livestock kept in mobile pastoral systems included buffaloes, sheep, goats, and cows/ox. On the other hand, village based pastoralism was usually practiced by owners of small to medium sized livestock mainly goats, buffaloes and cows. In the village, goats were bred for meat and milk, and sheep were mainly kept for their wool and meat. Traditionally sheep has important value in Gurung's culture as sheep are needed during death ritual called "Arghou"- sheep is regarded as spirit of dead family member. Buffalo was mainly kept for milk and meat whereas cow was mainly herded for milk and has religious value as cows hold religious values and is worshipped as mother in Tangting. Oxen were mainly herded for agricultural purposes as oxen are used to draw animal implement plough.

3.2. Status of Education, Environment and Social Network before Involvement of NGOs

Traditionally, education has not been a part of the culture of people in Tangting even though the availability of a quality education plays a pivotal role in influencing the economic well-being of rural areas. According to interviews

with the key informants, 20 years ago, the literacy rate in Tangting was approximately 25%. Since agriculture was the main source of subsistence in the village, people spent most of their time in their fields. There was one lower secondary school in the village with poor quality of education. The infrastructure of the school building was very poor and class rooms were not sufficient to accommodate more than 20 students. Thus in the past, classes used to run outside in the open fields during the sunny days whereas, school had to be shut down throughout the rainy season. Due to such miserable conditions, students were reluctant to attend the school. Moreover, villagers had a concept that attaining 5-6 grade education is enough for their livelihood. Hardly few household could support their child to continue higher education in the city. In addition, racial discrimination was persistent in the village and thus the occupational groups merely used to send their children to attend school.

Houses in Tangting were originally built with a wood and stone framework, covered with mud and dung and thatched with grass or corrugated iron. Thus, timbers from the nearby forests were always harvested beyond their regeneration capacity in Tangting. Traditionally, kerosene and firewood were used for cooking, heating, and lighting in the households, often supplemented by agricultural residues and animal dung. Due to lack of other commercial energy sources, villagers heavily relied on firewood, which is a free resource, as the only cost of firewood collection is physical effort and time. In Tangting, the over exploitation of firewood for household purposes (cooking, heating, and lighting) resulted to the degradation of natural forests that ultimately results in scarcity of local resources. Another disadvantage of the use of traditional biomass in Tangting was that people were susceptible to the impacts of indoor air pollution (mainly vision and respiratory illnesses) due to poorly ventilated kitchens.

In the past, villagers had limited network to the outer world. There were no mediums for communication including telephone and TV. Thus, the network used to be limited among the neighboring villages. In Tangting, during the evening time, villagers used to gather together to share news and stories and for other social activities. Usually, adult people (both male and female) used to gather in a common place to share different activities which is called as "Rodhi" (in the Gurung language, this means 'sleeping house'). In the past years, due to "Rodhi" tradition, there were incidents of unsafe sexual activities among the young people resulting in higher pregnancy rates among the unmarried girls. In the "Rodhi" tradition, usually the house had access to everybody and due to lack of monitoring made these places a safe haven for illicit sexual activities. Villagers had very few knowledge about sexually transmitted diseases and were not aware about family planning. In the past, the average family member used to be 8 in Tangting. Overall, villagers were deprived from social, cultural, political and economic opportunities prior to the involvement of the NGOs in Tangting.

3.3. History of Involvement of NGOs and INGOs in Tangting

The people based NGOs in Tangting have a relatively short history, especially when compared with other mountainous ethnic communities in Nepal. In order to promote natural resource conservation and sustainable community development in the Annapurna Conservation Area (ACA), Annapurna Conservation Area Project (ACAP) was established by the National Trust for Nature Conservation (NTNC) in 1986[16]. In an endeavor to improve the rural livelihood through the sustainable community development, ACAP started to implement their target goals in Tangting in 1992. Initially, ACAP tried to promote informal education among the illiterate housewives and evening classes were conducted by ACAP staff voluntarily. Low castes people were also encouraged to participate in the campaign. Gradually, villagers were taught about the importance of natural forests and the consequences of deforestation through the documentary and movies. Hunting and fishing were banned in the village. Moreover, people were motivated to generate other livelihood opportunities such as fruit farming, introducing improved varieties of paddy, promotion of indigenous knowledge and vocational training.

Within a couple of years, ACAP succeeded to bring some positive changes within the society. Due to evening informal education, most of the illiterate women could write their names in Nepali. Gradually ACAP formed mothers' groups who were responsible for controlling illegal gambling and drinking, and involved in social activities. Common toilets were built by ACAP within the village and provided about 75% of the total cost if a villager was willing to construct toilet in their residence. Under the scheme of Alternative Energy Promotion (AEP), established by ACAP, a micro hydropower (MHP) plant was installed in 1996 with an output capacity of 27 kW in Tangting. The primary objective of MHP plant was to provide clean and green alternative energy to firewood as well as to reduce firewood usage among the households. It is obvious that if a rural community has reliable access to renewable energy services, it can have a major impact on the environment. The micro-hydro based electricity brought many opportunities in Tangting. The use of traditional kerosene devices such as Tuki, Panas, and Lantern for lighting completely stopped in Tangting. The bright light had a positive impact, mainly for the students at Tangting where they were deprived of those facilities which hampered their study hours during the night.

During the day time, the power generated through the MHP was used for running modern agro-processing grinding machine which reduced workload to women. The incidence of health complications among the villagers due to indoor air pollution also declined after the introduction of the alternative energy in the village. The usage of firewood also reduced significantly. In addition, the villagers had access to modern mass communicating systems like TV, internet, and telephone and mobile phone services.

One of the encouraging benefits of the adult education

classes was that the gap existed in the relationship between the Gurungs and the occupational castes was reduced. Usually, evening classes were conducted in communal building and the occupational groups were also allowed to participate in the programme. The traditional gathering of adult people-“Rodhi” is also disappearing from the society after the village was electrified. According to the interviewed key informants, although they are on the verge of losing their traditional culture, it is good for the villagers that the “Rodhi” culture is getting a lower priority. In a way, diminishing “Rodhi” tradition has resulted in lower incidents of illegal sexual activities in the village. In Tangting, ACAP has played pivotal role in empowering the local community development and explored new opportunities for the villagers.

Pahar Trust Nepal (PTN), a UK based international non-governmental organization (INGO) is another main development actor in Tangting. PTN has a significant role in improving the education system in Tangting. A new concrete school building was built by PTN under the financial assistance provided by the Isle of the Government of UK (Figure 1). The Isle of the Government of UK provided USD 23,320 for the construction of a school building and furniture. After construction of the new building, Himalaya Milan lower secondary school was upgraded to the secondary level. Thereafter, student in Tangting could continue their study efficiently up to school leaving certificate (SLC) level in the village.



Figure 1. The new school building in Tangting funded by the Isle Government of UK.

Prior to the establishment of the new school, student had to transfer to a neighboring village-Sondha or migrate all the way to Pokhara for continuing further study. In addition, a hostel for SLC student was built under the financial assistance (USD 12,902) provided by the John Riley Isle of Man UK. Within a decade, Himalaya Milan Secondary has achieved remarkable progress in Tangting. At present, the literacy rate in Tangting is 85% and the success rate of student in SLC exam is also very high in the village (24 students out of 26 pass the SLC exam each year). Villagers conceived PTN as a god father of Tangting and the trust helped to link

the village school with the Maidstone Grammar school of the UK. The Maidstone Grammar School opened a library, science laboratory, computer laboratory, and donated computers and other materials to Tangting School (Figure 2).



Figure 2. New furniture donated by John ISLE of UK.

There has been a substantial assistance by UNICA foundation, Netherland, an INGO, in the field of environment (sanitation) and water supply in Tangting. This foundation donated approximately USD 95,774 for a drinking water project and sanitation in Tangting. The project was undertaken by the Red Cross Society of Kaski in 2008 and was completed by 2011. Under the scheme of these projects, three water tanks were constructed (Figure 3). Prior to establishment of the water tanks, villagers had to rely on springwater and there used to be acute shortage of water during dry seasons (mid-February to mid-April) in Tangting. However, at present there are approximately 209 water taps and there is a regular flow of water even during the dry period. The project established 209 toilets and announced Tangting as “fecal free village” in 2011.



Figure 3. New water tank in Tangting funded by UNICA foundation, Netherland.

UNICA foundation further provided additional USD 19,718 for installing smokeless stone chimney in the village. Altogether 206 smokeless stone chimneys were built in Tangting. Additionally, the department of energy, Nepal also provided USD 11,267 for implementing smokeless chimney project. As depicted in the Figure 4, at present, the inner

household environment in Tangting is totally free from indoor air pollution. According to the household respondents, present smokeless chimney is more effective as compared to conventional open fireplace. The consumption of firewood reduced significantly in the village (an average of 10 bhari firewood/year; 1 bhari= 25kg).

In the past there was no health service available in the village. Villagers had to visit neighboring villages even for minor health treatment. In recent years, the government of Nepal has established a sub-health post in Tangting. The Tangting Twinning Association (TTA) is a group of people from Tangting residing in the UK, support the villagers in different ways. The TTA has donated medicine for the health post and established a children day care center. In addition, the TTA promotes local tourism development and provides financial support for needy student in the village.



Figure 4. Traditional open fireplace and improved cooking stove.

4. Discussion

Farming, inclusive of agriculture and livestock, is the mainstay of the livelihood in Tangting. The survey findings revealed that approximately 85% households depend on subsistence farming, however, smaller fraction of households were also involved in job (10), labor (3%), business (1%), and other activities (1%), respectively. Due to the poor performance of agricultural sector, the trend of abandoning agricultural land is increasing in Tangting. Several factors including the sector's heavy dependence on the vagaries of weather, difficult terrain, adoption of traditional farming practice, use of local seeds, and low soil fertility are responsible for continuing the performance of the agricultural sector in Tangting.

Besides farming, abroad employment, wage labor, and handicrafts are the major livelihood sources in Tangting. In recent years, Tangting has experienced a rising volume of both internal and international migration. Poverty, unemployment, lack of access to natural resources, inequality and low income were major reason for increasing out-migration in the village. In one way, international migration provides opportunity for young people to experience the wider world, on the other hand, the growing numbers of migrants who send remittances back home have a profound impact on household income as well as improve socio-economic, demographic and political issues in Nepal[17,18]. The household income increased substantially after the outmi-

gration in Tangting was in rise. The households' survey revealed that more than 90% of the households out-migrated mainly to Malaysia, India, UK and Gulf countries for foreign employment. According to the interviewed key informant (migrant household), level of remittances were between USD 1,500 to USD 3,000 from the Gulf countries. Whereas, the remittance from countries like USA, UK, Hong Kong, Japan and South Korea were 10 folds higher than those obtained from the Gulf States. According to the household respondents, approximately 95% of the household incomes come from remittance in Tangting. Thus, migration and remittances are considered as major economic mainstays of the village. Furthermore, a great disparity between migrant and non-migrant households was found within the village. Migrant households had higher access to basic services including education, health, and resource consumption, whereas, non-migrant households had less access to education, health, and had less propensity to migrate.

The number of migrants increased significantly only after the involvement of NGO in the village it is because of the increased level of literacy that the NGO contributed to which in turn led people to out-migrate. The non-formal education conducted by ACAP in the village impacted the livelihood positively. Villagers could read and write and came to understand the real value of education. Prior to the intervention of ACAP in the community, only boys were sent to the school whereas girls merely attended the school. Rather girls were sent to the field to help their parents (for sowing seeds, grazing livestock, collecting firewood, and grinding grains). However, this orthodoxy was completely changed by the initiatives taken by ACAP. Similarly, people had access to telephone service after the village electrification and visual mediums such as TV and computer facilities. These digital technologies expanded the villagers' network with the outer world and could easily communicate with their relatives or friends abroad. Prior to this case study, there were 10 TV sets, 6 landline telephones and 150 mobile sets in Tangting. Gradually, the interrelationship between the Gurungs and the occupational castes also improved. In some instances, the occupational castes used to borrow money from the wealthy Gurungs.

Access to electricity reduces drudgery for women as they do not have to travel long distances for collecting firewood and grinding foods. Modern agro-processing mills in Tangting have brought drastic improvement to women's lifestyle, since they do not have to travel to the traditional water mill or "Ghatta" for grinding purposes[19]. Women now save plenty of time which can be used for other household related activities including cleaning and income generating activities such as weaving, netting, and so on. ACAP has played a substantial role in the development of education, health, environment and livelihood opportunities in Tangting.

Nevertheless, the massive exodus of people has left its toll in Tangting. The most immediate consequence was a high proportion of abandoned agricultural land. Prior to this study, an estimated of 45% Bari and 50% Khet were abandoned that were cultivated before 1990, respectively[20]. The total

agricultural production decreased substantially (40%) in the course of 20 years[19]. The increasing numbers of male out-migration has led to a shortage in households' labor, especially in agriculture and pastoralism. The livestock numbers decreased significantly between the 20 years mainly due to lack of local herdsman. Usually, people from the occupational castes were not allowed to work as herder in Tangting. On the other hand the Gurungs are highly motivated to involve in abroad employment because it is difficult for a shepherd or herdsman to get married in the village. Usually the shepherd and herdsman used to be from the poor and illiterate family background. Due to such pessimistic view, at present the numbers of livestock including sheep, goats, buffaloes, and cows/oxen decreased by 90%, 96.66%, 91.66%, and 95%, respectively, with reference to the year 1990[20]. Additionally, traditional knowledge such as netting of bamboo products, weaving of nettle, and weaving of woolen products are also declining.

Despite the fact that migration weakened the agricultural section, it is highly recognized as important complementary livelihood strategies in Tangting. The government of Nepal has started the rural development strategy after the restoration of democracy from the aristocratic Rana regime[8]. However due to political turmoil and center oriented development mechanism, the overall process of planning and rural development in Nepal remained plausible and unsatisfactory[21]. This study in Tangting revealed that NGOs play pivotal role in restructuring the underprivileged communities by providing opportunities to contribute for social transition through a massive social mobilization among general public. NGOs and INGOs are fundamental in providing opportunities for the disadvantaged groups such as occupational castes, indigenous ethnic communities, and backward rural communities in Nepal.

5. Conclusions

A case study was conducted in Tangting, one of the underprivileged ethnic communities in Nepal. The survey findings revealed that prior to involvement of NGOs/INGOs, people in Tangting were deprived from basic rights such as education, health and sanitation, social, economic and political opportunities. The living standard of the villagers changed significantly after involvement of the NGOs/INGOs in the village. People had access to electricity, modern digital communication systems, and the average annual household incomes also increased substantially. The NGOs/INGOs widened the villagers' livelihood opportunities by diversifying the rural activities. Moreover, out-migration became normal phenomenon among the villagers as major source of income.

Although households are facing problems with shortage of human labor for agricultural activities, there is a growing recognition of importance of international migration and remittances in the rural environment. However, remittances from migrant household members are reluctant to invest in

rural economic development and hence, there is a unidirectional flow of cash from rural-to-urban areas. These results underscore the need for future research to consider reasons that make people stay in rural origin. In addition, these findings give challenge to policy makers and decision makers to consider rural out-migration as one of the driver of change for rural livelihood strategies, especially agriculture practices.

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