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## Is foreign aid making a difference? A case study of Sagarmatha National Park Forestry Project, Khumbu, Nepal

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## IS FOREIGN AID MAKING A DIFFERENCE? A CASE STUDY OF SAGARMATHA NATIONAL PARK FORESTRY PROJECT, KHUMBU, NEPAL

Chet Bhatta\* and Michal Bardecki\*\*

### ABSTRACT

This paper describes a community stakeholder approach to evaluating the effectiveness of foreign aid and NGO involvement in an impacted community. The focus of the study, the Sagarmatha National Park Forestry Project (SNPFP), has operated in the Khumbu region for more than thirty years. The success of foreign aid and NGO activities was assessed by interviewing key informants with regard to their experience and perceptions concerning the project. The implications of this study include the recommendation that local people are the best source of information to measure foreign aid and NGO performance in a remote community. Furthermore, the future of natural resource conservation and rural development led by foreign aid depends on collaboration between the local people, NGOs and government.

**Key words:** foreign aid; accountability; participatory resource conservation; evaluation

### INTRODUCTION

Foreign aid and Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) have recently involved in various developmental activities of Nepal. Their number has increased significantly, but rural livelihoods and local environment experienced little change. There is no any particular policy

to evaluate the NGOs in Nepal. According to SWC (2010), the only provision of monitoring and evaluation was found in the SWC's NGOs and INGOs guidelines, which stated, "Monitoring and evaluation of NGO programs were conducted as a part of protocols agreed upon by the NGOs, INGOs and national government." Therefore, the enormous growth of foreign

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aid and NGOs does not necessarily justify their presence in the development process of Nepal; however, they definitely have some effects in improving an impacted community (Bhatta and Bardecki, 2013). Due to the lack of evaluative studies and government mechanism, foreign aid projects and NGOs claim their success in the form of reports. It made foreign aid and INGO-led development more skeptical in Nepal. In order to address this gap, this research adopts a community approach to study stakeholders' perceptions on the performance of foreign aid and NGOs with respect to reforestation in Khumbu.

The Khumbu region lies along the Nepal-China border in the Solukhumbu district of northeastern Nepal. There are approximately 3,000 ha of forest in the Khumbu Valley (Hill and Gale, 2009). For centuries, the forests have been essential in the daily life of Khumbu people as the source of fuel-wood for cooking and heating, timber for building and bridges, and litter or humus to mix with animal manure for soil fertilizer. Traditionally, the local Sherpas have various strategies to ensure abundant resources for their survival. They had forest guardians called *shinngi nawas* to make sure that no one harvested live wood and that forests were used according to community-sanctioned rules (Spoon and Sherpa, 2008; SNPFP, 2010).

With the establishment of Sagarmatha National Park (SNP) in 1976, tourism has been increasing consistently in the region,

growing from approximately 3,000 visitors in 1976 to more than 21,000 in 2006 (Nepal *et al.*, 2007). The dramatic increase in tourism has resulted in the development of lodges, seasonal settlement facilities and other forms of infrastructure (Nepal, 2001). Tourism development in this region has already threatened and destroyed ecological habitat and transformed the natural landscape (Stevens, 1993; Shrestha, 1994). Hill and Gale (2009) reported that the upper alpine zone above 4,000 m which had heavy tourist traffic is highly disturbed in terms of natural resources utilisation. Byers (2005) noted that between 1961 and 1995 about 40 to 50% of shrub juniper ground cover was lost on Dingboche hill slopes. Lodge owners, porters and trekking expeditions have contributed to harvesting these juniper shrubs although their relative contributions have yet to be determined (Hill and Gale, 2009: 54).

## ORIGIN AND DEVELOPMENT OF SNPFP

Initially, Sagarmatha National Park Forestry Project (SNPFP) started with the assistance of New Zealand (NZ) government which supplied finance and expertise through the Volunteer Service Abroad (VSA) and National Forest Research Institute (NFRI) between 1975 and 1981. Foresters from NZ were recruited by VSA and served under their conditions on two-year assignments. Their experience with raising locally collected seeds in the nursery

proved successful (Ledgard, 2010). Since New Zealand aid was only from 1975 to 1981 and was withdrawn in 1981, Sir Edmund Hillary and his Himalayan Trust proposed that the Sir Edmund Hillary Foundation of Canada (SEHFC) become involved with the National Park Department in a project to establish new plantations and expand and upgrade the nurseries in the Mount Everest region in 1979. The forestry work developed into a separate project, the SNPFP. SEHFC is the Canada based organization established by Zeke O'Connor, a close friend of Edmund Hillary, to honor Sir Edmund Hillary and Khumbu people.

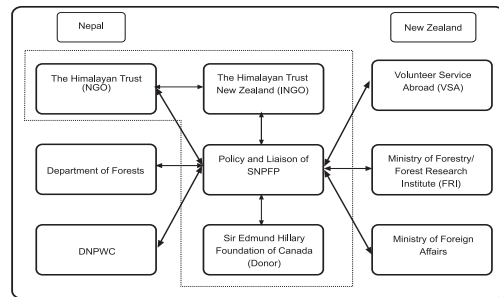
When the NZ Bilateral Aid Project terminated in 1981, forestry activities were taken over and financed by the HT NZ (The Himalayan Trust, New Zealand) with the program control being undertaken by the SNP's Warden for a transition period. The HT NZ provided Nepalese Rupees (NRS) 100,000 (\$NZ 10,000) per annum from 1982 to 1984 for the forestry work. From 1985 onwards, the funding was increased to NRS 300,000 (\$NZ 30,000) for a period of five years due to the assistance provided by the SEHFC. The SEHFC took on major responsibility for the SNPFP in 1981 when a formal proposal for planting one million seedlings over a six-year period was approved and funded by Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA) (Gurung *et al.*, 2010). From 1985 to onwards, the SEHFC took the whole responsibility of funding and

management of SNPFP through the HT NZ and the Himalayan Trust, Nepal (HT NP) (Hardie *et al.*, 1987). The human resource needed for the forestry work was recruited from the local Sherpa population and a foreman was selected and trained. Additionally, by the end of 1986, there were five permanent nursery operators in three nurseries who were well experienced and competently carried out all nursery operations. Still, there was a gap in overall forestry procedures and the entire project was devoid of expertise which would benefit from direction given by qualified and competent foresters (Hardie *et al.*, 1987).

In 1985, a team of four New Zealanders: Norman Hardie (Team Leader), Dr. Udo Benecke, Peter Gorman, and Penny Gorman, visited the SNP and compiled a major document on the forests of Khumbu with the help of government officials and other staff of SNP and Department of National Park and Wildlife Conservation (DNPWC) Nepal. They outlined several important recommendations for the SNPFP's future management; however, there were several problems with the immediate implementation of all of these recommendations. There were several delays due to the conflict among local Sherpa people, SNP officials, and SNPFP's implementers. Actually, the professional management of the project recommenced in 1989 when Sir Edmund Hillary (Chairman, the HT NZ) and Zeke O'Connor (Chairman, SEHFC) visited the

Khumbu region. At that time, they were also accompanied by New Zealand Forest Research Institute (NZFRI) Scientist, Nick Ledgard, who provided major technical assistance for the management of the SNPFP ever since (Gurung *et al.*, 2010). Since 1989, the New Zealand foresters, Nick Ledgard (SNPFP Manager), employed by NZFRI, the SNPFP Supervisor, Ranjit Gurung; Nursery operators, Ang Diki Sherpa, Mingma Chamji Sherpa, Ang Chamji Sherpa, Ang Tharke Sherpa, and Dawa Chhoki Sherpa have played a crucial role (Gurung *et al.*, 2010). Additionally, local environmentalists and foresters, Mingma Norbu Sherpa and Dr. Lhakpa Norbu Sherpa, also contributed in managing SNPFP in different phases of the project. Nick Ledgard visited SNPFP area 12 times (each for 15 to 25 days) during the overall course of the project including his first visit in 1989 accompanying with Sir Edmund Hillary and Zeke O'Connor to take the leadership of SNPFP and last visit on November/December 2010 to hand over the SNPFP to SNP and local people (Ledgard, 2010). Additionally, Gordon Baker (Forester, NZFRI) and Zeke O'Connor visited a few times in absence of Nick Ledgard. Likewise, the Warden, Assistant Warden, Rangers, Game Scouts of SNP, and whole Khumbu community also assisted in the activities of SNPFP in many ways. The policy and liaison of SNPFP during the phase of establishment is further illustrated in Figure 1.

**Figure 1: Policy and liaison of SNPFP during its origin.**



The objective of the SNPFP was outlined as, “To promote the sustainable management by the local people of the forests and shrub lands of SNP area, to provide stable soils, desirable habitats for fauna and flora, and the forest products essential for the long-term survival of local communities” (Gurung *et al.*, 2010). The main project activities were: managing nurseries; selecting plantation sites and establishing plantation; taking care of already established plantation sites; and promoting education and awareness to local communities and to visiting trekkers for sustainable forest management (Gurung *et al.*, 2010). It took eight years to plant one million seedlings (SNPFP, 2010). Now, SEHFC claims SNPFP as a success with its nurseries having produced over 2 million seedlings in about 300 ha of plantations with a survival rate of 80%. Furthermore, SEHFC insists that the expertise to continue the project sustainably is present within the community, mainly as the current project staff and the local people they have trained (Ledgard, 2009). Additionally,

with the prospect of continuing funding since the SNP buffer zone programme returns 50% of park entrance fees to local communities for development and environmental protection purposes such as forest management (Ledgard, 2009), the SEHFC handed over the project to the local people in coordination with the Department of National Parks and Buffer Zone Management Committee in 2010 (Ledgard, 2010).

## **RESEARCH FOCUS AND APPROACH**

Globally, aid donors have invested billions of dollars through NGOs in sustainable forest management to conserve forests and the ecosystem services they provide. Even though foreign aid and NGOs were established with good intentions, the results associated with NGO-led development in developing countries are mixed. On the one hand, foreign aid and NGOs are credited for promoting democratic values, advocating human rights, protecting and conserving natural resources, and empowering indigenous populations and women in rural communities (Castells, 2005; Collingwood, 2006; Fisher, 1997; Madon, 1999; Willis, 2005). On the other hand, they have been criticised over issues of legitimacy, accountability, transparency, representation, and performance (Anderson, 2007; Bebbington, 1997; Edwards and Hulme, 1995). Nepal is an ideal location for studying the impact of foreign aid and NGO involvement in rural

development as the number of NGOs grew from just 293 in 1990 to over 27,000 in 2010 (SWC, 2010). NGOs in Nepal have established themselves as important stakeholders in the development process. They claimed to have positively impacted the lives of rural communities and are established as a partner in the development process of the country. However, several scholars disagree with this claim (Acharya, 1997; Bhattachan, 2004; Siwakoti, 2000). Bhattachan (2004) opined that, despite more than two decades of NGO involvement in rural development, rural areas in Nepal, they have changed little. However, the lack of a good evaluation of Nepal's NGO sector challenges any generalization about the role NGOs play.

In this study, the effectiveness of foreign aid and NGO involvement was assessed by focusing on key informants in the Khumbu community with regard to their experience and perceptions concerning the SNPFP project. Since the objectives and rationale of the foreign aid and NGO sector are to serve communities and deliver services to them, community members are posited as the best source of information for evaluating SNPFP. The central research question concerns how members of the communities perceive the role of SNPFP in Khumbu reforestation. The study is intended to provide a case review of the effectiveness of foreign aid and the NGO sector with the objective of suggesting potential policy and programme changes.

A number of stakeholder groups can be identified in the local community: local inhabitants, former project participants, national park and buffer zone officials of SNP, and local and national environmental experts in Nepal. A purposive sampling technique was used to select the key informants (KIs) on the basis of their knowledge about SNPFP, their relationship to the project, and their role in the field. KIs were identified with the help of telephone conversations and in person visits with local leaders, Himalayan Trust officials and SNP officials. In some cases, additional informants were identified using a snowball-sampling process, specifically to include members of some under-privileged groups and environmental experts working in this area. Although including those involved in using forest areas was emphasised, an effort was made to ensure inclusion of both those dependent on the forests, such as farmers, and those who do not rely on forest areas, such as local business owners and local school teachers. Each informant was well informed about the purpose of the study, the researcher's identity, their right to refuse to answer at any time, the need for their consent, and the confidentiality of data.

Information was collected from the informants using a semi-structured interview format and participant observation. Seventy-nine interviews were conducted. In addition, additional information was gathered through

informal conversations, and by observation during visits to nurseries and plantation sites. In addition, secondary data in the form of SNPFP reports were analysed.

All interview guides covered the same questions to collect common information about SNPFP such as: connection to the study area, understanding about SNPFP and their activities; biggest success and challenges to SNPFP; impacts of SNPFP to local environment; institutional sustainability and vision for the future. Modified interview guides were prepared for different stakeholder groups as required. Responses from the interviews were transcribed, translated to English, and analysed.

### **STAKEHOLDERS' PERCEPTION ON FOREIGN AID: IS SNPFP MAKING A DIFFERENCE IN KHUMBU?**

Stakeholders have different perceptions on the performance of SNPFP. While they highlighted SNPFP for maintaining three nurseries and 300 hectares of plantation in Khumbu, they also pinpointed issues of post plantation care and management. The respondents had their positive views that it was better to have something than to have nothing. However, most local people are not well informed about project handover and most of the respondents raised concern over the issue of who would be responsible for the plantation sites in future.



Informants were asked what they perceived about the role of SNPFP in the Khumbu reforestation programme. Although majority of respondents viewed SNPFP played a vital role to generate forest awareness among both local residents and tourists, they also pointed to many shortcomings such as lack of institution building at local level, carelessness in plantation and post-plantation care, and the lack of a sustainable management plan as part of the project handover. One environmental expert who worked for another NGO in Khumbu complained that the entire forestry project was operated for over 30 years without involvement of a technical forester except for some technical advice of foreign manager during short visits of 1-2 weeks each year. Here is what he stated:

Obviously, SNPFP did a great job by maintaining three nurseries and planting diversity of plants in different plantation plots of Khumbu. However, the entire project was managed for more than thirty years by a project manager who did not have any technical forestry knowledge. That is why, there were so many technical errors in plantation and post plantation care each year which cannot be corrected by foreign manager in his short visit. There were no efforts made for institution building at the local level as there were no participating committees and sub-committees except a project manager and nurseries' operators. Local people

were only involved in the process of site selection and plantation. Project leaders highlighted results on the basis of number of seedling transferred from nurseries to plantation sites; however, in reality the entire seedlings in some plantation sites were browsed by animals and others are too crowded and cannot accommodate their growth soon.

A majority of interviewees were uncertain about project handover. Respondents were asked whether SNPFP should have been transferred sustainably to SNP and local people for a long term. They reported that the project was handed over in a small meeting with neither a detailed workout nor a future management plan. One local resident described the situation thus:

The project was handed over in a hotel at Namche in presence of a small group of people affiliated with the National Park, Buffer Zone Management Committee, Himalayan Trust, and a few local people. The root cause of the project handover seems like aging of project employees. However, there were no solid future management plan and no younger generation prepared enough to take over. The proposed one-year transition period to draw up a management plan did not work out at all. Nurseries are now vanishing, one is already closed and other two hold some seedlings but they stopped the seedling production process that requires three to five



years to transfer into plantation site. Now nursery operators are working without salary for several months and are uncertain about for whom they are working. Because of these facts and truths, I can say that SNPFP was successful in establishment of nurseries and plantation sites in Khumbu, the sustainability component is still question-marked by Khumbu community.

Many key informants pointed out that SNPFP made no efforts to conduct a summative evaluation to assess program effectiveness in Khumbu community. Most of the respondents in the interviews complained that SNPFP officials did not return to evaluate project impacts. They reported that NGOs were like elected political leaders: failing to visit the community once the project or election was over and returning only to implement new projects or to campaign for re-election. Responding to these questions, project leaders of SNPFP indicated that evaluation is a government responsibility. They further added, because of lack of financial and human resources, SNPFP did not have policies for conducting post-project evaluations and surveys. More interestingly, one government staff member from the District Forestry Office noted that SNPFP only needed to submit their evaluation report to the donors and Social Welfare Council of Nepal and further added that evaluation was only a formality in which only positive

impressions about the project were reported. Moreover, one staff member from the Social Welfare Council of Nepal said there is no specific process available to evaluate the effectiveness of foreign aid and work done by an NGO. Projects are only categorised on the basis of amount of funding. From these circumstances, there is little to ascertain the situation should there have been a gap between what SNPFP reported to their donors and reality.

## **LESSON LEARNED FROM THE PROJECT**

The study indicated a failure to incorporate activities and future plan with community needs. SNPFP carried out an extensive re-forestation programme without taking the initiative for local adoption in the long-term. This mismatch in community capacity building contributed problems in the longevity of project, which is consistent with findings of many authors who suggested the same reasons to the failure of many development projects implemented by many INGOS and NGOs in developing countries (Chambers, 1993; Ashley and Maxwell, 2001; McMichael, 2008). This study also revealed the gap in the involvement of multiple donors and identified how these gaps impacted on quality of foreign aid and NGO-led project. For instance, the HT NZ decided on the hand-over of SNPFP while SEHFC was still in the favor of continuation of the project in a reduced scale. It indicated

that the decision making process among participating institutions was not participatory which in turn resulted in the project hand-over without the drawing of a management plan. Likewise, the interaction of SNFPF with local government and SNP was very limited; it just fulfilled the imposed requirements such as to determine the plantation sites and to get their consent in the phase of project hand-over. The political instability of the country is the another prominent cause as the budget of the buffer zone could not be utilised for the local development, as the funds were diverted to the other purposes and the project was abandoned. In these circumstances, the success of foreign aid and NGO-led project; therefore depended on the mechanism of how it was implemented rather than who implemented the project.

Therefore, this study recommends that strong collaboration between the local people, the NGOs, donors, and the government is the key for the sustainability of foreign aid and NGO-led projects. Likewise, the involvement of broader set of stakeholders in the process of evaluation is very important to allow triangulation of the project activities and minimise the falsification in the report just to ensure funding is continued from donors. At the same time, this study also recommends that the government of aid recipient country should take their serious responsibility in the phases of inception, operation, and hand-over of the foreign

aid and NGO driven projects as the longer term follow up and continuation is in many ways the responsibility of the government.

### **RESEARCH APPLICATION: WHAT ARE THE STEPS TO BE TAKEN?**

This study explored one of the most understudied aspects of foreign aid and NGO-led natural resource conservation and rural development in Nepal and the implications it holds for the future foreign aid led development projects in developing countries like Nepal. These findings are particularly relevant for understanding the impacts of foreign aid and NGOs' activities on powerless rural communities. Although several studies have evaluated the work of NGOs and effectiveness of foreign aid, this study adopted a community approach for assessing the impact of foreign aid and NGO activities. The understanding of these issues is still limited, although their importance has been emerging. It is necessary to understand how foreign aid and NGOs interact with other actors such as states, donors and multi-national corporations.

This research can contribute to the study of foreign aid and NGOs. Future foreign aid and NGO-led natural resource conservation and rural development should be more collaborative involving various implementing agencies and, critically, local stakeholders. Such interactions

should focus on identifying issues in the community, selecting the implementing agency, developing a monitoring and evaluation policy, and promoting accountability and transparency. Such purposeful interactions would result in long lasting and mutual relationships among stakeholders, governments, donors, and NGOs, which are critical for successful natural resource conservation practices and rural development to occur. Similarly, the enhanced interaction would facilitate the sharing of information among the stakeholders as to where, when and how projects are implemented. The interaction would also focus on ways to integrate financial, technical and local resources to implement larger projects, which would bring substantial changes to communities.

This study also explored the fact that local and extra-local agencies involved in NGO-led natural resource conservation and rural development should focus on creating and strengthening the community field which cuts across several social fields and attempts to unite them as a whole, includes the general interests of community members, and is not targeted towards particular sectors (Theodori, 2005). A strong community field would entail successful adoption and continuing management of completed projects. It will help to generate the process involved in assessing problems faced by the community; and once a problem has been identified, stakeholders can interact

to develop an integrated solution to issues. They can also identify how each stakeholder can contribute. A stronger community field is key to making foreign aid and NGO-led development sustainable at a local level.

## **FUTURE DIRECTIONS: WHERE WE GO FROM HERE?**

This research suggests a new perspective on the role of foreign aid and NGOs in natural resource conservation and community development in rural areas of developing countries. However, a number of avenues remain open to further research. First, this paper focuses on a single project, thus future research should move towards covering multiple projects. Such studies would serve to fill the empirical gap that currently exists between previous individual project level case studies and micro level analysis. Second, research on the role of international development organisations and donors in promoting participatory forms of development and conservation practices in developing countries are also of utter importance.

This study also raises some important questions worthy of future research. For instance, do donors and NGOs develop any model of evaluation for their terminated projects? Do their reports correspond to the reality of their activities in the impacted community? To what extent do their logics and consequences conflict? How are foreign aid and the governments

of developing countries coupled? What are the evaluation criteria developed by the governments of developing countries to assess the effectiveness of foreign aid and NGO activities?

This research recommends more studies to assess the effectiveness of projects associated with foreign aid and NGO activities in other rural communities. Such studies are critical for improving the NGO sector, and for narrowing the gap between international aid agencies and community development. NGOs should not view evaluation as interference from government authority or donor agencies. Instead, they should use evaluation to improve their effectiveness. On their part, government and donor agencies should adopt appropriate evaluation techniques to prevent resource misuse at the local level. Monitoring and evaluation are an important instrument to make natural resource conservation and rural development effective. Further research on the role of the government and local people for the successful implementation of NGO-led projects are necessary to make foreign aid and NGO-led activities more successful and sustainable.

A critical perspective of NGO organisational practices must be adopted by researchers and integrated into an understanding of development and social and environmental change. Shifting how donors perceive accountability and evaluation may be a slow process, but

should remain a focus of the NGO-led community development. If NGOs are not able to reflect upon their own activities and concentrate on reporting positive results in order to maintain funding, it will be difficult to achieve their goals and to ensure that NGOs are indeed reaching the right stakeholders in the proper ways. Legitimacy, accountability, transparency, representation, and performance are the major areas that need to be further explored in relation to NGO-led conservation and development projects (Anderson, 2007). There are only a few examples of research that examine the processes and negotiations of evaluation for NGOs that work for conservation and grassroots social change (Hilhorst, 2003). This research has demonstrated possibilities for increased understanding of NGOs and evaluation that can result from this community approach. Furthermore, it opens the door for future research that will help to examine more closely the complexity of the practice of evaluation and how it relates to the significance of NGOs and their role in negotiating the meaning of conservation and development. At the same time, future research should critically examine how NGOs are located in newly emerging social patterns and what kind of specific spatial and discursive positions are taken by them. Follow-up research would be always beneficial, in light of the long-term timeline of evaluation development and implementation.

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