



**Strengthening Advocacy and Local Government
Accountability Project**

A Reflective Learning Report

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Prepared by

Harisharan Luintel and Netra Timsina
**Forest Resources Studies and Action Team
Ekantakuna, Jawalakhel
P. O. Box 12207, Kathmandu, Nepal
Phone: 5 550631
Email: forestaction@wlink.com.np**

Strengthening Advocacy and Local Government Accountability Project: A reflective learning report

Introduction

Strengthening Advocacy and Local Government Accountability (SALGA) project has been implemented in the four Terai districts (Siraha, Saptari, Dhanusha and Sarlahi) of eastern part of Nepal, with the aim to create good governance by strengthening the people's advocacy actions and sensitizing the duty-holders about their accountability to generate better livelihood opportunities particularly for the poor and marginalized in the project area. The Asia Foundation coordinated the project implementation with the USAID's funding. Two national level NGOs - Pro-pulic and INSEC took the major implementing role of the project with the technical support of ForestAction.

The main purpose of the report is to provide a glimpse of the overall impression of the project in terms of learning so that the further improvement of the project process could be made. This report is about the reflection and learning drawn from the project. The report draws the lessons on the basis of the close observations of the project process and interaction with the project field teams, local people, district level federations and coalitions and other local stakeholders. It highlights some impressions, reflections and learnings from the project both in terms of its concepts and implementation. It also provides the second-generation issues to be addressed further in the project area. As the positive outcomes of the project is compiled and reported by its implementing partners through various progress reports, we tend to supplement those reports focusing on drawing major reflections, lessons and impressions from the field.

Some impressions on the concept of the project: strength and weakness

The project has greatly appreciated and incorporated the concept of citizen government interaction for establishing good governance at local level, which is crucial and very important to strengthen democratic processes in the local communities when the democratic system is still in its infancy and the hierarchical social structure is prevalent in the society. It also has recognized and tried to utilize the vast potentials of federations, coalitions and citizens' networks, which are very important for strengthening civil actions and people's advocacy in the context of Nepal, because such potentials are often ignored in the past. It also attempts to link the various development sectors such as forest, water and women visualizing as an integral part of the society. The project has organized various joint reflective meetings of the stakeholders of different sectors. Moreover, it has tried to pull various expertises from many organizations and individuals as project partners in the project processes. A NGO collaboration and partnership approach among the implementing organizations was visualized and adopted to integrate various sectors and expertise in the project process. It also has appreciated the linkages of field reflection, monitoring and learning, to the policy processes in improving governance of the institutions involved.

However, the concept has provided a limited emphasis on distributive justice among and within community groups to address the issues of equity and internal governance, which

are the major issues in empowering the weaker section of the society and consequently strengthening the civil society particularly federations/coalitions.

Activism is important in people centered advocacy; however the project has not adequately visualized the role of the local activists.

A mechanism in terms of performing actors' role and coordination to translate the project concept into practice seemed to be complex and inadequate. There were limited clearly defined operational roles and the linkages of the staff of the implementing agencies; local NGOs and master trainers and it did not seem a clear link among the persons and institutions involved in supporting the federations/coalitions. Again, the linkages of the roles of the federations/coalitions, watchdog committees, lead groups, other general user groups and the villagers in general are not adequately visualized.

Reflections from the project activities: strength and weakness

(a) Some strong points

Project got implemented in adverse political situation

When the project was initiated, the political situation in the country was not conducive for project implementation. Most of the time it remained the same except for few months of the project period. Moreover, the local government, one of the most targeted clients in the project, was also been dissolved. However, the implementing partners have continued this project with some adaptation. The partner institutions were found to be committed to implement the project activities and thus almost all the activities got implemented.

Extensive use of media

This project has used the media and the press successfully to make an effective advocacy particularly to sensitize the duty-holders in their responsiveness and accountability. The local newspapers exposed the cases of corruption, and misuse of the resources by the duty-holders particularly government officials. However, very little responses from the concerned agency were observed to the media news. Similarly, the national news papers and journals have published the issues prevalent in the project area.

Effective conduction of public hearing and public audit

A number of issue-based public hearings were organized to bring the right-holders (people) and the duty-holders (government officials) together to discuss their rights and responsibilities. The public hearings related to forestry, irrigation and VDC budget allocation were found to be the most effective ways to raise the concerns of the people and awareness level. Many of the government officials made written and verbal commitment to deliver the services in an efficient way. As a result, in many occasions, DDCs and VDCs have agreed to allocate the budget for the development of the poor, marginalized and women groups. Several community forests have been handed over which were in hold by the DFOs before the public hearings. The implementing agencies

have promoted the public audit system by facilitating DDC and VDC budget analysis, which led to a bit more transparent practices.

Successful conduction of experiments for methodological innovations

An action learning approach for promoting governance reform and self-monitoring process was experimented at local level with various groups such as FUGs, WUAs, VDCs and women groups. The result of which was found very useful in reforming the internal governance and empowering the poor and marginalized, which formed to be the main foundation to identify the issues, organize the people around the issues and put the advocacy in action by the people themselves. This process was appeared useful to address the issues related to internal governance of user groups, and social justice particularly equity (for example the case study of Gagan Khola FUG and Bastipur VDC's budget analysis). This process also seemed to be useful to mobilize the local people and exert the pressures to the federations and networks working at district level to strengthen the advocacy actions. The outcomes of the action learning process were fed in to other partners' and federations' on-going activities to improve the quality of the project activities through training and reflective workshops.

Awareness raising and capacity building

A perspective of critical awareness has been raised regarding the rights of the people over the resources to some extent among the local people and federations/coalitions. Thus, an increased level of demand from the users was observed for the devolution of power to manage and utilize the natural resources. For example, increased demand of forest handover to the local community in the project districts.

Coalitions have been established to advocate for the women rights at the district level. Similarly, the federations in irrigation and the forestry sectors have also been established (FECOFUN district chapter in Sarlahi district, FECOFUN range post chapters in four project districts, Irrigation federation in Siraha district etc.). These indicate the proliferation of the people's networks or the federations. However, the attitude and capacity of the federations did not seem adequately favorable to the weaker section of the society. It was observed that the federations/coalitions are being dependent on the NGOs and other agencies for planning, financing and implementing the activities. Federations have not been sufficiently empowered to carry out advocacy in a systematic way at the local level.

(b) Some weak points

Weak coordination between partners

As visualized in the project concept, this project has been able to involve multi partners having different expertise, which also has recognized the role of local NGOs, federations and other institutions as partners in the project processes. However, it was found difficult to learn and share the expertise and knowledge among the partners involved in the project processes. It was due to the less appreciation of other partners' perceptions, values and expertise by some of the project partners. Rather than making a synergy, some times it

created a situation of conflicts and tensions between the partners that resulted into non-coordination in relation to implementing the project activities.

During the project implementation, it seemed to have very weak linkages among the three sectors viz. forestry, irrigation and women. For women issues, witchcraft appeared to be prominent issues, while for those who were promoting the forest and water issues, this was not appeared as an important one. At the same time, the issues related to the women's access to and control over the decision making of natural resource management did receive much focus by those working in the water and forestry sectors, while the same issue was considered as mechanistic and paid little attention by those who were working for the women right issues. These different attitudes, understandings and priorities caused poor co-ordination among the partners in project implementation.

There was inadequate linking mechanism between the watchdog committees, lead groups and the federations/coalitions. Though all these are people's organizations, it seemed to have different interests between them whereby the issue based alliances have not been built on as strong as it could have been as visualized by the project. While Watchdog committees were more interested to the issues of public litigation and less focused on particular sectoral issues, federations and coalitions were interested more on sectoral issues such as forest, water and women. Moreover, the lead groups focused on their own internal governance and other very specific local issues related to their particular group.

Low level of people's participation

It was observed that the participation of the people in various project activities were not to the extent as it was expected. Even in some activities, the gradual reduction in people's participation in the project activities was observed. As mentioned by the local people, it was partly due to the low quality of project activity implementation such as less interactive methods used in the training, less appreciation and encouragement of the people's voices, the dominant nature of the project staff etc. A poor understanding of the concepts and practices of the people-centered advocacy was found among most of the project staff partly due to personal attitude and behavior, low level of commitment and inadequate capacity. Resisting attitude and behavior of some of the key project staff for accepting the innovations, maximizing the learning and adapting the local situation was seemed as a constraint in the volunteer participation of people in the project processes. Furthermore, most of the project activities were found to be scattered, discrete, fragmented and stereotype and it was difficult to make the clear linkages among the activities in the field, which also caused the less interest of the people in the project processes.

Top-down approach of management

Though the people's advocacy demands a flexible management support, a top-down approach of project implementation with less appreciation of feedback from the ground level was prevalent in the project processes with some of the project partners. A well-established feedback mechanism from field level staff to the central level project authority did not appear. Thus, the reflections from the field could not be fed in the project process timely to improve the quality of the project outputs. Quite a few

operational freedoms were given to the field staff, which, as said by the field staff, had not sufficient discretionary power to adapt the local situation such as they could not even allow participating a single person (with genuine interest) in the training/workshop without the prior approval of the central level project authorities. This sort of non-flexible project management approach could not facilitate to create a conducive-environment for the action learning process for advocacy actions.

Inadequate institutionalization of the advocacy actions

There were quite a few advocacy campaigns generated during the project implementation period. The partners understanding on the concept of advocacy appeared significantly different, as some partners understood it as a process and movement from below and some understood as a snapshot event to solve the particular problem and/or the development activities get done. Moreover, the project staffs were not found to emphasize the institutionalization of the advocacy as a process. Rather they were found to be concentrated on solving the particular issue at local level, and not well connected to the broader interest of the local people. Sometimes the project staffs were seen to have (so-called) good relationship with the particular government official to make particular things happen rather than facilitating affected people themselves to perform this role. Such actions may lead to the dependency of the federations and people's organizations to NGOs, donors, and project staffs.

Some insights and learning

Conceptual clarity regarding the project concepts, mechanisms for the project implementation and partnership modalities of the project should be considered carefully at the initial stage of the project which needs to be continuously follow up and review during the project processes. Reciprocal relationships among the partners and understanding and appreciation of each other's role is very important in partnership building and strengthening.

A significant amount of discretionary rights decentralized to the implementing organizations is to be clearly mentioned and reviewed time to time jointly. Those rights need to be further decentralized by the concerned organization to the field staff to facilitate and adapt the project in the local situation so as to ensure the better outcome of the project.

Diversity in interests, values, visions and capacities of various partner organizations is to be appreciated by them (partner organizations) without any prejudice, as all of these are useful in one way or other to the broader society in general. These diversities will provide an opportunity to enhance the project outcomes with synergistic effects as well as increase the possibility of innovations from new insights and learning. A very clear value, commitment and vision on the partnership and the continuous sharing and reflection among the partners regarding the project progress is required to implement the project having multi-partners in implementation processes. A broad understanding need to be made about the project such as the kind of the expertise need and supply process; the process of project implementation, assurance of the quality of the activities etc. among the partners at the inception phase of the project. However, even with a bit higher

transaction cost, effective co-ordination and interest negotiation among partner organizations is needed for which a very committed organization and staffs are required to ensure strengthening partnership at all levels during the project process.

With the implementation of this project, it is seen that even in the non-conducive political and security situation, the project can be implemented with local modification particularly by mobilizing the local NGOs, hiring local field staff and mobilizing local level people's organizations. In such a situation, a project needs to be managed with regular reflection to adapt the local condition by following the principle of "management by exceptions".

A continuous follow up of the advocacy action through media as well as other methods such as delegation, reminding letters etc. from the people's side is needed to sensitize duty-holders to fulfill their roles and responsibilities. A mechanism with independent source of financial resources is needed to continuous and effective follow up of the people-centered advocacy. With the sensitizations and capacitating, the federations /coalitions can perform this role.

A carefully planned and designed public activities such as public hearing, public audit, etc. have been proved effective advocacy action, in which the general public (right-holders) along with duty-holders interact directly for resolving the issues. The local people especially the poorer and weaker section of the society need to be empowered to speak about their pain, expectations, interests and rights before participating in such events.

Conscious learning element (deliberate focus on the learning outputs of the project process) should be incorporated in every implemented activity so that the possibility of innovations will increase. Innovations are the life giving factors in the organizations, which give new spirit, empowerment and interest among the people. In SALGA project, the conscious learning elements, particularly review and reflection, were recognized in the conceptual level. However, it could not be fully translated into practice during the project processes due to the resistance and limited appreciation of the element by some of the key project staff. However, in the later stage of the project process, these staff also realized the importance of the continuous review and reflection.

Second-generation issues

By synthesizing the learnings from the first phase of the SALGA project, there are some issues arisen which need to be addressed in the next phase of the project. These issues are termed as second-generation issues and described in brief as below.

Social justice in community level

The equity in cost and benefit sharing does not exist in the community level in the project area. In most of such cases, communities perform the activities in equality basis, which may not be socially just always. Positive discrimination is needed to distribute the benefits (more for poor than rich) and cost (more for rich than poor) of any common property resources. The first priority of the access on the common property resources

should be of poor, marginalized and weaker section of the society. In many occasions, the poorest of the poor are in minority in the community and their interests are often overlooked (such as the decision of ban to enter in the forest seems to be good for the health of the forest and many users (having various income sources) may agree on this decision. However, those people whose livelihood is solely depending on the forest (such as fuelwood seller) may be affected adversely. Thus, the minority or even the single individual's livelihood should not be adversely affected by the decision of the majority. These principles need to be adequately addressed in the community level.

Governance reform in user group level

The governance in the user group level is found to be very poor in the project area. However, due to the conventional power relationship between the executive members of the user group and the general users and also the low level of trust to the outside facilitating agencies including local level government officials, poor, marginalized and weaker section of the society are being exploited in many forms. The transparency regarding decision-making, resource mobilization, financial transaction, opportunity grabbing/sharing etc. in local level is very limited. There is a very low level of participation of poor, marginalized and weaker section of the society. Participation of the local people in the resource management needs to be viewed as their rights. People who are affected directly by the certain decision need to be participated themselves in the decision-making process. However, in practice, elite, powerful and the members of the executive committee dominate the decision-making process. Similarly, the decision-maker and implementator need to be accountable for their decisions and actions, which is found very low in the user group level. Again, all the members need to be bounded in a certain rules. However, practices showed that the rules are made only for the weaker section of the society but the rich and elite break and dis-obey the rules.

An action and learning process by the consensus of all the members of the user group need to be established to continuously follow up, monitor, learn and adapt the situation to ensure the good governance within the user group level which empower the poor and marginalized people.

Governance reform in different levels of federations

The representation of the poor and marginalized section of the society is very low or almost nil in the federations of community forestry users and irrigation water users at various levels. However, 50% women representation in the committee in all levels is mandatory in case of FECOFUN. Local level elite domination in federations is common including women. While interacting with the general users, it was realized an inadequate sense of accountability of the federations to their member constituencies. Rather they seemed to be obliged towards the center level (upward). The financial transactions and other decision-making process were found to be non-transparent. Even the participation of the members for any sorts of decision-making was found to be only for legal formality. There seemed to be adopted a non-participatory and top-down approach of decision-making approach. There is a lack of clearly defined and divided roles for the members. Thus, the governance reform is necessary in the federations at various levels (national, district and range-post/village).

An action and learning process need to be established to continuously follow up, monitor, learn and adapt the situation to ensure the good governance within the federations.

Capacity building of the local activists and federations

The roles of the social activists need to be recognized and their potentials should be used to the extent possible at the local level. The leadership development of the federations and the activists through actions and campaigns is necessary. The capacity of the local activists and the federations seems to be poor in terms of their understanding, attitude, commitment, and behavior to articulate the people's interest and defend their rights particularly the poor and weaker section of the society. The capacity building of federations and activists is possible through the real advocacy action that they perform with the help of their members and the training and workshops can be the supplementary one.

Wider linkages to strengthen the advocacy

To adapt in the changing contexts and address the need of the pluralistic society, cross-institutional alliances, cross-sectoral alliances, issue-based alliances, local-meso-national level linkages, lobbying, loose and flexible networking etc. on the basis of value rather than particular activity are necessary. Effective usages of mass media also have great implication in this regard.