

# INTERNATIONAL N.G.O.S APPROACHES TO INSTITUTIONAL REFORMS IN NEPAL

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**Abstract:** Poverty, caste and gender inequities continue to challenge the creation of economically and socially just societies in Nepal. In such a context, international non-governmental organizations (NGOs) are emerging as important developmental actors in reforming social institutions such as belief systems, attitudes, and traditions, among others. International NGOs are internationally funded organizations that have been working towards building strong and just communities in Nepal since the 1960s. This study explored the International NGOs approaches to institutional reforms in Nepal.

This qualitative study was conducted with ten International NGOs operating in Nepal in the areas of gender and caste equity. The data collected from interview, focus group discussions and secondary research were analyzed in terms of emerging themes and for external validity interpreted from human rights and development theories. The study found that the development emphasis is on the capacity building of women, dalits and their organizations, partnership with local organizations, participatory development and advocacy, social investment, awareness education, and social and economic empowerment. As a result, marginalized groups have been able to unite, organize and advocate for their rights and state accountability. This also reveals that International NGOs are adopting right based approach to development.

This paper will look at how International NGOs are undertaking development policies as a way of reforming social institutions in a Himalayan country ridden by a decade-long conflict.

**Keywords:** Nepal, Institutional Reforms, International NGOs, Right Based Approach, Development

## I. INTRODUCTION

International NGOs, a major development partner of Government of Nepal, have been involved in Nepal since 1954 in the areas of

poverty reduction, health, education, agriculture and environment. Their interventions are geared towards reforming social institutions. Social Institution<sup>1</sup> is a stable set of formal and informal rules, principles, norms, and attitudes regulating different spheres of human activities and form of social system (Sedov, 1990:16-118). In Nepal, social institutions play a major role in organizing and governing the society and people. Caste and gender inequalities are deeply embedded in the existing social practices and system. Poverty is considered an outcome of such discriminatory and unjust practices. Dalits, so called *achhoot* (untouchable) people in Nepali caste based society have limited access to available resources, participation in society, and freedom to utilize their skills and creativity for their self and economic prosperity. The strong concept of purity and holiness in society discriminates Dalit people, whom they consider impure, dirty, and poor. As a result, they have precarious social conditions. The literacy rate among Dalits is too low in comparison to other non-Dalits. According to the Demographic and Socio-economic survey of Dalits (NND SWO, 2006), the overall literacy rate of Dalit population is about 66 percent. Moreover, it is about 78 percent for males and 55 percent for females. Their political representation is minimal. The social unacceptability discourages them from taking part in any public life. Most of the dalits are landless and have no major source of income. In Nepal, poverty is also commonly associated with landholding as many people live on agriculture.

Similarly, the major reasons of gender inequality are rooted in unfair cultural and traditional practices, which assigns certain roles, dos and don'ts to control and govern women. In the patriarchal system of the country, males are considered higher ranking than

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<sup>1</sup> *institutional reforms* in this study would be changes in the social, cultural, religious, political, legal, tradition and belief system that have been governing Nepali society.

females. Only men can carry out the important religious and cultural rituals which insure that their purity and high status. The male child is preferable to a female. Legally, women are prohibited from inheriting parental and marital property and decision-making roles. The socio-cultural restrictions limit women, like dalits, from self-development and participation in socioeconomic activities. Until 2006 children from single mothers were denied citizenships in the absence of the fathers, and citizenships were issued only from the father's record. Single women are socially discriminated and confined to traditional and cultural roles and in some extreme situation they are likely to be psychologically and physically abused. The family acts as a first social institution that reinforces patriarchy and control over women. As a consequence, in 2001 only 42.5 % of females are literate in comparison to 65.1% of males (Central Bureau of Statistics, 2004).

The legal protection and administrative efficiency to curb the caste and gender equality and welfare program for this marginalized group is minimal and inadequate. There has been some significant improvement in poverty reduction in the last ten years; however the decline in poverty has been accompanied by an increase in inequality. The Gini coefficient increased from 34.2 to 41.1 (World Bank, 2006). Therefore, international NGOs with partnership with local and grassroots NGOs are reforming the social institutions that subjugate women and dalits and stop them from realizing their freedom. They are utilizing rights based approach to reforming these social institutions because of the RBA's potential to enforce moral and ethical obligation of the state and to empower the victims to realize and claim their rights for the equitable and just society.

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## II. LITERATURE REVIEW

*Rights-based Approach: A General Overview* Human Rights-based Approach (RBA) to development has gotten high currency among development organizations. U.N. agencies, and growing number of NGOs including CARE, Save the Children, Action Aid, Oxfam GB, World vision, Plan International have adopted or shown commitment to RBA in development programming and policy since 1990s ( Nelson & Dorsey, 2003; Plipat, 2005; Jochnick & Garzon, 2002). Bi-lateral donors like SIDA and DFID also promote rights perspectives in their international aid assistance. UNDP's embracement of human rights framework and publication of its report, Human Rights and Human Development in 2000 (UNDP, 2000) gave new energy to right based approaches drawing the principles of international

human rights as well as the strategies of human development to advance dignity and well being.

The right to development concept was one of the earliest convergences of human rights and development. Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948) articulated economic, social, cultural, civil and political human rights in a single document with the aim of preventing the horrors of mass war from ever happening again. Article 1 of the Charter of the United Nations identifies international cooperation and in promoting and encouraging respect for human rights and for fundamental freedoms as one of the purpose of the organization (*OHCHR Website, 2004*). Started in early 1970s, the right to development movement was initiated by Third World countries to establish legal and ethical foundation for redistribution of international resources. After a long diplomatic negotiation, the UN General Assembly adopted the Declaration on the Right to Development (DRD) in 1986. According to Moser (2004) rights-based approaches suggest a switch from a technical to a political understanding of development. Key components of rights based approaches include the premises that: (1) people have rights, (2) governments have obligations and (3) people's participation is central. Despite NGOs own guiding principles on RBA, there are also some central principles to all; the right to development is a foundation to all human rights approaches.

### *Right Discourse: Accountability, Participation, HR Education and Program Design*

The literature in right discourse and practice can be categorized under four broad principal applications- accountability, participation, human rights education, and project and program design. First, accountability is a core focus of RBA as it clearly redefines the nature of the problem-the gap between the delivery of obligations and fulfillment of rights- and aims of the development into claims, duties and mechanism. Development scholars argue that development is to be measured from justice perspectives, Weerelt argues "The principle of the Rule of Law includes resolution of competing claims, access to justice and redress for abuse of human rights and the just distribution of public resources and the benefits and burdens of particular policies" (2001:8). The state is the primary duty bearer and is responsible for protecting, promoting and fulfilling the human rights of its citizens (ActionAid, 2008; Sengupta, 2002; Nelson and Dorsey, 2003). Civil society and international community are also accountable following the state. Moreover, "national development policy and programs of development agencies should thus become instruments of democratization and the empowerment of civil

society rather than perpetuate technocratic approaches to development” (Marks, 2003:15).

Different mechanisms are proposed to make state, civil society and international community accountable as well as right claimants as political actors in addition to human rights declaration and covenants as guiding principles (Nelson and Dorsey, 2003; Atack, 1999; Edwards, 2000; Jordan & Van Tuijl, 2000; Naidoo, 2000; Nelson, 1997). But consensus is in building the capacity of the right holders and right bearers (Sengupta, 2002; Sen, 1999, UNDP, 2006; O’Neill, 2003). As a result citizens can recognize and claim their rights and the duty-bearer can meet its legal obligations. The nexus between claimants of rights and fulfillment of rights by duty bearers offers an opportunity for citizens to expand their freedoms which in return enhances their capacity to realize “kind of lives they value” (Sen, 1999:18). Freedom is the “basic building blocks” (18) to realize the live people wants.

Second, the right to development approach provides a normative basis for making participation a fundamental dimension of development process (Marks, 2003, Sengupta, 2002; Moser, 2004). The international laws and declaration<sup>2</sup> provide a strong basis for citizens to make claims on their status and for states to account for their duties to enhance the access of their citizens to the full realizations of their right (Cornwall and Nyamu-Musembi, 2004). It is also a political process where citizens, not beneficiaries of the development projects, are involved in advocacy and community mobilization (Gaventa & Valderrama, 1999). The development in RBA is also centered on the concept of equity and justice as development is expected to raise the living standards and capacity to strengthen wellness of the entire population (Sengupta, 2002)

This allows marginalized people equal rights to participate in the development activities that affect them. Their participation to claim and assert the rights at different stages of development have potential to change the dynamics of power in development (Chapman, 2005; Veneklasen et.al. 2004). In CARE programs the marginalized groups are identified and their participation is encouraged to build their capacity so that they can advance toward addressing rights through advocacy, and through strengthening civil society (Rand, 2002).

The empowerment and capacity building of marginalized groups plays a decisive role in changing

the power structure. It builds the decision-making and leadership skills required for their effective participation in campaign and advocacy. Otherwise there is a danger that campaign and advocacy could exclude or make their participation ineffective. Such advocacy and campaign do little to change the power structure or dynamics. In fact, they “promote a singular focus on policy reform which often results in advocates being consumed by lobbying whether they are members of international or national NGOs or, in some cases, even grassroots leaders” (Chapman, 2005:7). ActionAid sees non-participation of poor and marginalized groups in the process that affect them simply as the result of exclusion and rights abuse as “they are wrongly considered to be mere beneficiaries or recipients”, which, “undermines peoples’ dignity and their confidence to think, plan, and negotiate”(2008:7).

Third, human rights education is an important component of RBA. It facilitates capacity of rights holders, and help them realize their rights to development, and it also informs duty bearers to meet the legal and moral obligations and fulfill the rights of the rights-holders (UNDP, 2006; O’Neill, 2003, Marks, 2003; Nelson and Dorsey, 2003). According to Nelson and Dorsey (2003:2017), “projects that deliver services can integrate those services with efforts to articulate the rights of citizens and the duties of governments, and perhaps of international donors and other agencies”. ActionAid, in its projects, raises critical consciousness of the right holders as the first step to enable them to understand rights, injustices and ultimately take action (ActionAid, 2008).

Finally, the project and program ideas can be identified by analyzing from rights perspectives because of their greater implications in development process and outcome (Nelson and Dorsey, 2003). Global and International organizations have their own emphasis and strategies in program design. UNCIEF through casualty analysis<sup>3</sup> seeks to identify basic causes of discrimination, and looks for social and political relationship between rights bearers and duty bearers, and their capacity gaps (Jonsson, 2003). Similarly, CARE looks at root causes analysis of social issues from benefits-harms analysis, and models like SPHERE<sup>4</sup> for incorporating standards into designs (Rand, 2002). Action Aid looks at power dynamics and rights abuses in development

<sup>2</sup> Declaration on Human Rights Defenders, the resolutions on the UN Decade for Human Rights Education, and the Declaration on the Right to Development provide useful reference points for advocating participation.

<sup>3</sup> The essence of causal analysis is the examination of the underlying causes of a condition, problem, or event.

and employs ALPS<sup>5</sup> strategy in its programming and monitoring to ensure accountability to all its stakeholders, particularly to the poor and excluded people with whom we work (ActionAid, 2006).

### *Challenges and Criticisms*

In the application of RBA, NGO's and other development organizations have encountered a number of problems. The lack of one particular term, definition, language or uniform approach (various types of human right approaches) have generated some confusion and difficulty in connecting the approach with the program goals (Cornwall and Nyamu-Mausembi, 2004; UNAIDS, 2004). It is also unclear what human rights based approach implies at the project level of NGOs (Nelson and Dorsey, 2003). However, right based approaches have a common base which is both international and regional right instruments (Tsikata, 2004). In terms of the selection of RBA, the sociopolitical context of country as the determining factor sometimes, positions as a challenge to the implementation of RBA programs (Filmer-Wilson, 2005).

It is also argued that RBA itself is a critical challenge to communicate to donors and supporters accustomed to the discourse of needs and poverty reduction (Offenheiser & Holcombe, 2003; Nelson and Dorsey, 2003). Finally, NGOs also have experienced the tension between HR standards, local initiatives (Nelson and Dorsey, 2003) and local socio-cultural challenges (Filmer-Wilson, 2005).

Some above mentioned challenges and other programming strategies of RBA has produced a number of criticisms in the development of discourse and practice. The first and foremost argument is that RBA is just, "a pretty new bottle of old wine" (Chapman et.al. 2005) and a mere redressing of language (Tsikata, 2004) for redefining poverty and miseries (Uvin, 2002). Such arguments point out the fact that *participatory* and *empowerment approaches* that RBA gives high attention is hardly a revolutionary idea. It is because they exist in development discourse since 1960s, without claiming it for human rights approach to development (Tsikata, 2004; Uvin, 2007). It is undisputable that the human-rights paradigm constitutes the basis for a different practice but has been much harder to achieve and implement (Uvin, 2007) due to the existing gaps between the rhetoric and execution of

RBA. In addition, application of human rights at the project level of NGO's is less clear (Nelson & Dorsey, 2003). One of the reasons might be because majority of development NGOs only have human rights perspectives to development assistance and poverty reduction (Ljungman, 2004). It is also argued that the accountability, what is at the heart of RBA, really seems to be missing somewhere in the implementation of the commitments made through declaration and understandings. The roles and commitment of national states and international in ensuring rights are still being debated (Tsikata, 2004). The disagreements about "whether the right to development is a group right of the rights of individuals and the legal force of the rights being enumerated, which some have argued are mainly in the realm of values without the force of law" (Tsikata, 2004:5). States tend to express full support to international declaration and commitments but do not stick to its basic principle in development practice (Marks, 2004). It is also real that states with poor institutional capacity and resources have experienced impediment in the realization of economic and social rights (Mehta, 2005). Furthermore, the international community has not fulfilled its pledge fully either (Marks, 2004). It is unclear what role(s) they should be playing in international development, cooperation and policy. Northern governments have denied that a duty exists to provide resources to address the problems of developing countries. At the same time, RBA is also criticized for being state centric and holding the state accountable for development under international law (Manzo, 2002). Mehta (2005) points out the right abuse in the name of development such as damn construction where both international agencies and national states are to be blamed. Manzo (2002) also accuses RBA's for holding neo-liberal policy development framework and doing little to empower people. Such criticism, shortcomings contradiction and ambiguity of RBA have challenged it being a revolutionary development paradigm.

Despite these critics, human rights approach provides a normative framework to guide the development identifying the obligations of duty holders and rights claimant, which brings ethical and moral dimension to development (Hausermann, 1997). Nonetheless, the future of RBA will depend on the extent to which governments are willing to address the political and practical obstacles to its implementation (Marks, 2004) as well as the extent to which the international community meets its commitments. It is strongly urged on seriousness to solve the shortcomings of RBA evident in development and to save development approaches from repetition of failure of one after another.

<sup>5</sup> Accountability, Learning, and Planning System (ALSP) is a framework that sets out the key accountability requirements, guidelines, and processes in ActionAid International. Not only in terms of organisational processes for planning, monitoring, strategy formulation, learning, reviews and audit but also personal attitudes and behaviours.

### III. METHODOLOGY

The research was primarily an exploratory study of International NGOs' approaches to institutional reforms on the variables of gender and caste equality, poverty and civil society. The qualitative study used in-depth interviews of key informants to get a "richer" (Rubin & Babbie, 2005:428), "deeper and fuller" (Cherry, 2000) understanding of International NGOs approaches to institutional reforms in Nepal. The exploratory study method was adopted in order to ascertain some knowledge of a relatively *new topic* 'Institutional reforms approaches of International NGOs in Nepal' (Rubin & Babbie, 2005:123).

The study used a purposive sampling method. International NGOs in Nepal were considered the theoretical sampling population. The 15 active International NGOs were selected for the study using three criteria: International NGOs working period, geographical focus, and areas of work related to research variables. During the field study in Nepal from December 2006 to January 2007 only ten International NGOs<sup>6</sup>, and eight NGOs representatives actually participated in the interview and focus group. To improve the external validity, key informants, program managers, with excellent experience in the field of caste, poverty, gender, and civil society were consulted within those International NGOs and local NGOs.

The researcher designed a questionnaire, with open-ended questions. In addition to a set of structured questions some probing questions were asked to further explore the emerging topics. Questions were broadly formulated in five sets. The first set was general questions that were applicable to all participants. The four other categorical questions were only asked to the participants who had been working in the thematic area of the research variables. The questionnaire instrument was not tested for validity and reliability due to time limitations. The questions were formulated on the basis of the thesis questions and operational definitions of variables.

### IV. DATA COLLECTION

Data were collected from both primary and secondary resource. Field data were collected primarily from interviews and a focus group discussion. In total, eighteen people participated in the study, thirteen in individual interviews, and five in a focus group discussion. A brief research orientation, and the signing consent forms for the

<sup>6</sup> ActionAid, The Asia Foundation, CARE Nepal, Helvetas, LWF Nepal, MS Nepal, Panos South Asia, Plan Nepal, Read Nepal, The United Mission to Nepal

interview and focus group were done prior of the interviews. . The interviews were audio-taped and transcribed. For verification and more clarification of data further follow up interviewees were conducted in the field. Participations were informed that their participation was voluntary and they were not offered any incentive to participate in the study.

The secondary data was collected from the International NGOs official publications, such as their newsletters and annual reports. Most of the information about NGO programs were public and open for any academic or general use In order to assist the research process, some organizations emailed their unpublished reports and data. All of the International NGOs agreed to state their organization's name but interviewee's names were kept confidential while coding data.

### V. DATA ANALYSIS

Data collected from interview and secondary research were analyzed in terms of emerging themes and for external validity interpreted from human rights and development theories.. First, the raw data were transcribed into Microsoft Word program and each response to questions from the interview were numbered assigning a code of organizational name and Arabic numbers such as Plan 9001, Plan 9002. Numbers were used to make it easier to follow the transcribed data while categorizing and coding. The secondary data related to the thesis question were also selected and copied to a word file. Second, all the data were organized under the questions on the questionnaire used to collect data. Third, data were categorized under various descriptive categories in terms of emerging themes, such as programs, barriers in social development, institutional reform approaches. Fourth, the descriptive categories were organized into construct categories to find interrelation with other variables. Finally, using the descriptive and construct categories the researcher reached the conclusion.

### VI. LIMITATIONS

The study sample is relatively small in comparison to the size of international NGOs and NGOs in Nepal due to the limited resources and time. Given the small sample size it is not possible to generalize to all International NGOs approaches. Much of the research relies on the data collected from International NGOs and NGOs representatives, who were recruited for the research study. The honesty in sharing true information on their part is very important. In addition, International NGOs in Nepal are not free from criticism on their transparency, accountability and performance in their programs and work. There is a lot of discontent about their work

and programs. The reliability and accuracy of the information gathered from subjects cannot be verified from other sources. However, researchers tried to avoid this problem by sampling most popular and reliable International NGOs. Since the study is an exploratory study it neither captures all the approaches of International NGOs under study nor does it study their approach to institutional reforms intensively. It is also not an evaluation of their programs and policy.

## VII. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

The findings are organized under International NGOs approaches and programs targeted to reform the social institution for caste and gender equity. The study found that their approaches to institutional reforms are capacity building and social capital, social and economic empowerment, participatory and advocacy, and social investment, which conform to the 'rights based approach' to development. It is because those approaches build the capacity of dalits and women to help them claim their rights and make duty bearers, mainly government and the international community accountable to reforming social institutions to promote just and harmonious society. Through these approaches they are able to promote micro and macro changes at individual and societal level. Such positive changes are noticed on individuals' attitude, perception, and behavior, and in state behavior and policy. They have yielded positive outcomes in gender and caste equity. Women, dalits, and poor people have greater social acceptability, voice, decision-making power and stake in their communities and public sphere.

### **Capacity Building & Social Capital: Redefining Civil Sphere Expanding Freedom**

International NGOs are not directly involved in a change process at the local level but partnering with local and grass-root organizations known as non-governmental organizations (NGO) and community-based organizations (CBO). This has given rise to hundreds of local NGOs at grass roots increasingly in the past decade where women and dalits have taken leadership and managerial responsibilities. This new structure and network had created a social capital of marginalized groups as well as breaking the existing trend of leadership and organizational culture, where women, dalits and ethnic minorities were excluded from decision-making and leadership. In the traditional culture, elite men and so called upper caste people (non-dalits) predominate or influence public sphere and community organizations pushing their private agendas and self-interests. In other words, the emerging leadership and organizational culture is redefining the culture of civil society, public sphere

and civil pluralism. In addition, for the sustainability of these organizations and civil society international NGOs are assisting in the capacity development of their staffs, volunteers and leaders. They train them on small project management group works, increasing participation of dalits and women, participatory review and planning, and coordination and linkages. Women and dalits communities have found strengths in unity and organization, where previously little solidarity existed.

Social capital strategy is playing a vital role in forming groups and networks to initiate and sustain the institutional reform. Local NGOs work with groups in order to implement their programs and sustain social change. Group is an informal micro organization of two or more people, usually five or six, with a common goal and purpose. Some of the examples of popular groups are micro-credit, self-help, literacy, user, and saving. Bringing organization and people together for common goal and purpose International NGOs and their local partners are promoting strong social capital, which is becoming very powerful force in bringing changes in terms of gender and caste equity, and social and economic empowerment. Plan International alone has 600 child clubs, and the ActionAid Nepal (AAN) has 113 women's groups and their network. Most of these women groups are similarly functioning because they are fighting for common causes of women's rights awareness, advocacy and economic independence. In Parsa district, the Women's Rights Network, supported by AAN's partners Arunodaya Yuva Club (AYC) and Divya Yuva Club (DYC), have managed to receive grants worth Rs 100,000 from the VDC especially for single women, HIV infected women and victims of violence.

Groups and networks, inspired and formed by NGO initiatives, are growing into community power and social platform of marginalized groups, contrary to what used to be to a means of implementing NGO's programs. In groups, members share and relate their concerns and experiences while engaging in dialogue, discussion and planning the agendas. They share issues related to their lives and experiences, and help each other find solutions to their problems including the issues of rights and justice. The sense of security that they find within the group help members speak off the issues they otherwise wouldn't in family or community. In absence of such a platform, even a victim, a widow or dalit would fear speaking against any traditional ill and unjust practices against them and/or their community. Many combined-groups ensure inclusion of women, dalits and other minorities, discouraging the practices of exclusion based on gender, caste, ethnicity or any privilege. The group moderator discusses legal awareness and orientation to rights issues, and the development of critical

analysis capacity on social situations of community people. Thus a group plays multiple roles in empowering its members and reforming unjust practices.

### **Social Empowerment Programs: Claiming Rights & Changing Power Relationship**

Dalits and women are getting socially and economically empowered to challenge social injustice and unfair practices. The social empowerment programs of NGOs such as literacy classes, human rights education campaign, legal awareness, and group discussions on social issues are increasing critical awareness of dalits and women. The AAN has adopted Freirian's literacy with some modifications, known as Regenerated Freirian Literacy through Community Empowerment Technique (REFLECT) builds the critical awareness of oppressed people to deconstruct the institutionally constructed myths and meaning to dominate people. The empowerment approaches are also enabling them to dialogue, advocate, organize and lobby to influence policy decisions on social justice and poverty reduction. As a result government is forced to allocate more funding for women and dalits welfare and empowerment program than ever before. NGOs program, also, encourage non-marginalized groups to participate and benefit from such empowerment programs in order to give them a chance of reflection of their unfair action, attitude, and behavior towards their family or community members. Such programs are helping them change their attitudes and actions of discriminations. Several temples in Nepal are open for dalits, and more and more daughters are going to school alike their male siblings. The girls' scholarships have given opportunity to pursue school and college education, and vocalize women rights and discrimination. In some villages they have become role models in society, in the sense that their educational attainment and social status has developed positive attitude in the society that women have equal ability as men to perform and achieve their personal goals. As a result fellow villagers have started sending their daughters to schools and colleges breaking the tradition of early marriages. Empowerment programs have enabled women and dalits to take leadership in public and political institutions such as school management committees, community forest users' groups to national level in the parliament. Asarfi Sada, a dalit rights activist, and, Moti Devi Chaudhary, a former Kamaiya rights activist were nominated as members of the historical Interim Parliament in 2006.

### **Economic Empowerment Programs: giving voice, changing roles & dependency**

Economic empowerment approaches of International NGOs are contributing to social revolution in the marginalized communities. The livelihood programs, such as supporting a scheme of bee keeping, savings and credit fund program, kitchen gardening, fish farming, banana farming, and job oriented skill development trainings are bringing economic changes as well as social revolution. These programs have helped marginalized groups step outside of their traditional roles and become independent entrepreneurs. Women are increasingly involved in non-traditional income generation programs, such as small scheme business, driving taxis and three wheelers, candle making, incense making, soap making, cycle repairing, tailoring, pickle making, spice grinding, machine knitting, and physical therapy. Dalits, who were once barred from entering non-dalit owned restaurants, now, own their own restaurants, and in some cases even non-dalits frequent their restaurant, which they consider a radical change from a social acceptability point of view.

Economic empowerment programs have enabled women and dalits to step up for their justice, mainly because their dependency on their partners or upper class people exits no more. Their economic independency is minimizing the exploitative relationship between men and women, and dalits and non-dalits. The increased decision-making power within their family and community has given them more freedom to exercise their political and social rights, and enjoy social freedom. Historically, economic dependencies of women and dalits over men and non-dalits have forced them to tolerate exploitation and made powerless creatures as they lacked means of livelihood. In other words economic empowerment is redefining relationship and contributing to build just society.

International NGOs economic development program is reforming traditional occupation of dalits and women. Though in a small numbers, dalits and women are getting training and opportunities on modern occupation in market economy as such in micro enterprise promotion, skill development training (modern mechanic skills and farm-based skills). Even those who wanted to adopt farming are getting opportunities to improve their production. The program supports agricultural development infrastructure such as irrigation/water supply schemes. Helvetas' program trains dalits and women to develop advanced skill such as in improved farming, cultivation and marketing of non-timber forest products and cash-crop, trade based skills such as carpentry, house wiring, hairdressing, tailoring, and leather work. Economically empowered dalits are

able to break off such exploitative relationship with non-dalits as they were no more dependent on them for their livelihood. Economic empowerment also has sustained social empowerment of women and dalits.

### **Participatory & Advocacy: Fighting Against Unjust Practices Demanding Accountability**

Utilizing advocacy, campaigning, and organizing strategies taught from NGOs, women, dalits, and minorities are claiming their rights through advocacy and social action, both at local and national level. NGOs emphasize dalits and women's participation and action to intervene their problems by themselves. Dalits are advocating for their right to participate in all community activities and development initiatives as well as enter public spaces. Regarded as untouchables, dalits are barred from participating in any non-dalit group activities, and entering some public places such as restaurant, temple and community center. This could best be illustrated what one of the research participants shared, "...when dalit women were drinking tea in a local shop a Brahmin man asked them to move as he was about to be served. But instead of following his direction one of the dalit women replied that they have no problem to drink tea with him. If he had any problem he could move from there" (Participant, 2007). This is a strong indication of empowerment that women are stepping up to change the unfair practices of discrimination and securing their rights to equality.

Similarly, women at grassroots level are campaigning against ill treatment of widows or single women and initiating good practices. They meet with the families of widow and convince them to stop unfair treatment and cruelty. In Hindu society widows are restricted from wearing any red clothes and traditional makeup (chura, sindur, and ornaments), participating social events, and getting re-married. But due to women's campaign and advocacy hundreds of widows have broken these social barriers. Women groups organize a public ceremony to start a new practice and accept widows and single women in society. In the ceremony, numbers of widows re-initiate wearing red vermilion on their forehead, symbolizing that they are now free to wear colorful clothes and get re-married. Women are also campaigning against dowry system, domestic violence and child marriage. Even children clubs are tackling serious issues and help change attitudes of the elders in their communities. The children of the 'Chetana Bal Bikas Samuha' recently brought about a change in attitudes that prevented their friend, Lalmuni, from being married off at 14 years of age- a common practice in their community.

Dalits and women networks, once invisible in their own locality, are now making changes in a national level through lobbying and pressure groups

to reform legal and government policies. In the past they have given immense pressure to local governments and administrators, member of parliaments, speaker of the house, cabinet, and political parties on the agendas they were advocating for. They have lobbied with various political parties representing in parliaments to reforms existing unfair laws and legislate new ones. Women groups are continuously raising their voices on issues like violence against women, women's rights to citizenship, women's property rights, and vital events registration. The Asia Foundation supported advocacy by local groups was instrumental in repealing a discriminatory provision requiring women applying for a passport to get permission from a husband or other male relative. The government also reduced the fee women must pay to register property which has substantially increased in women's land ownership (Participant/The Asia Foundation, 2007). The Parliament passed a resolution in year 2006/7, which guarantees the provision of citizenship from mother's name, the provision of 33 percent reservation for women in parliament, and decision to amend all discriminatory laws against women. The Parliament also ratified the Optional Protocol to Convention on Elimination of all forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW).

Similarly, dalits advocacy and campaign have forced government to form national dalit commission, to implement previous commitment on dalit rights and welfare, and prioritize dalits' issues in the Ninth and Tenth Plans. The Ninth Plan not only outlined 5 major objectives for the Dalit upliftment but also forwarded a vision of 20 years program for elimination of all forms of discrimination. The Tenth Plan has clearly reassured about government bringing definite policy implementations for women empowerment, Dalits and indigenous people. Through radio programs dalits and women are able to voice their concerns in national policy making. Panos South Asia's radio program *The Jeebika* (Livelihood) series identified livelihood security issues of the country's poor in the context of the Nepal government's poverty reduction policies. The series provided an opportunity to those who were stakeholders in the PRSP<sup>7</sup> policy and process to air their concerns. These landmark decisions in reforming policy and legislations are a result of continuous advocacy of various women and dalits rights organizations, International NGOs and their networks.

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<sup>7</sup> Poverty Reduction Strategy Papers (PRSP) are prepared by government through a participatory process involving domestic stakeholders as well as external development partners.



### Social investment programs: Technical Support for Grassroots Capacity building

International NGOs are supporting communities through social investment in order to assist institutional reform initiatives and their sustainability. Through social investment approach, International NGOs are assisting in developing community's infrastructure, technical expertise, and grants. First, social investment approach supports communities for their institutional reforms efforts by making essential resources available in their community, strengthening their capacity and meeting their essential needs to start up the projects. Plan International invests its resources in safe drinking water and environmental sanitation because children are at risk of exposure to communicable diseases and women to more drudgery due to inadequate access to safe drinking water and environmental sanitation, and to poor hygiene and living conditions. Read Nepal invests in library, including infrastructure construction and other needed resources to increase minority people's right to access information, which is a building block for reforming social institution. Other International NGOs invest in the construction of school buildings, small scheme irrigation, water and sanitation, school library, establishment of F.M. stations making availability of equipments, and providing computers. Second, technical expertise include: full time development volunteers for certain periods of time, building capacity of board members, staff and volunteers, and improving organization management skills. In order to ensure the sustainability and effectiveness of the program they also assist in 'post project support program'. M.S. Nepal places development volunteers from Denmark in their partner organizations in various districts to share their knowledge and experience with minority groups. The third and final type of social investments comes as small grants to support partners and sub-partners' initiatives. This includes start up funds for savings and credit group, providing of seeds and tools for kitchen garden program, baby fish, baby goats, chicks etc. for livestock projects to generate income, and funding radio programs, publications, conference and campaigns.

### VIII. CONCLUSION

NGOs and their partner NGOs' human right based programs and strategies are changing power dynamics through right education and claiming, and capacity building, which conforms to rights based approach to institutional reform and development in Nepal. This new development programming and approaches also mark a paradigm shift from needs based and charity approach to rights based approach to development in Nepal. Majority of the

organization studied under the study have switched to RBA or any variation of human rights framework to reforming institution and promoting development; however, some have switched completely, others have partly, and some are even testing it.

The RBA to development has yet to bloom fully into practice in Nepal. As a result some challenges and Achilles' heel in the adoption and application of RBA have been surfaced. Some International NGOs are just using the language of RBA in their program "largely to invoke the discursive power of the concept of rights, without intending to bear the weight of the entirety of consequences that flow from it" (Cornwall and Nyamu-Musembi, 2004:1433). Others are using the language of rights just for the sake of confirming to new approaches for securing funds from donor organizations who have adopted RBA. These discrepancies are evident when International NGOs and their partners' fail to clarify what human rights based approach implies at the project level and whether they are able to change power structure and dynamic in Nepali societies as a result of their interventions. Further study and evaluative research can explore more in these areas.

Yet, the efforts of empowerment, building grass roots initiative and social capital, advocacy and social action, and social inclusion have helped to inject human rights perspective in development practice and policy. To some extent International NGOs and their partners are successful in reforming the social institutions and discriminatory social relationship. The women, dalits, poor and other oppressed people have been able to voice their issues, make decision on their needs, reform their social institution, find unity on themselves, and, indeed claim their rights.

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