

**Stakeholders' perceptions of foreign aid and an NGO-driven project:
A case study of Sagarmatha National Park Forestry Project in
Khumbu, Nepal**

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Background: Globally, foreign aid, international non-governmental organizations (INGOs) and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) have emerged as important actors in development. The number of aid agencies, INGOs, and NGOs has increased significantly, especially in the developing world. However, this growth does not necessarily mean foreign aid and NGOs are effective at the tasks they undertake, including improving rural livelihoods and protecting local environments. Furthermore, the lack of evaluative studies on the effectiveness of foreign aid and NGOs involvement challenges claims of success often found in their reports (Anderson, 2007). Neither NGO reports nor prevailing independent research provides a comprehensive and realistic assessment of the impacts of NGOs on the communities in which they work (Rugendyke, 2007). Even though foreign aid and NGOs were established with good intentions, the results associated with NGO-led development in developing countries are mixed. Nepal is an ideal location for studying the impact of foreign aid and NGO involvement in rural development as the numbers of NGOs grew from just 293 in 1990 to more than 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 partners in the development process of the country. However, several scholars disagree with this claim (Acharya, 1997; Siwakoti, 2000; Bhattachan, 2004). Bhattachan (2004) argues that, despite more than two decades of NGO involvement in rural development, rural areas in Nepal have changed very little. However, due to the lack of a good evaluation, Nepal's NGO sector challenges many generalizations about the role that NGOs play.

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Problem and research questions: Since the 1950s, the Khumbu environment has degraded as consequences of tourism and pressures from domestic animal-raising. Though environmental degradation in Khumbu is a well-publicized issue, it is in reality a poorly understood phenomenon. The literature during the last three or four decades outlined issues related to population pressure, lost forest cover, overgrazing, terracing of marginal land, depletion of wildlife, pollution, shortages in fuel wood, landslides due to slope instability, and several geomorphic hazards in Khumbu valley (Sterling, 1976; Reiger, 1981; Byers, 1987; Abbott, 1985; Sherpa, 1985). These challenges became the basis for many past and on-going development projects in Khumbu region, although many authors raised issues about contradictory data and questioned the soundness of formulating management policy on subjective interpretation (Currey, 1984; Byers, 1987).

Many foreign aid agencies, INGOs, and NGOs started to work in Khumbu to restore its environment. Among them, Sagarmatha National Park Forestry Project (SNPFP) worked more than 30 years to restore the forest in Khumbu. The project was initiated by Sir Edmund Hillary in conjunction with the Sir Edmund Hillary Foundation of Canada (SEHFC); the Himalayan Trust, New Zealand (HT NZ); the Himalayan Trust, Nepal (HT NP); Sagarmatha National Park (SNP); and the Department of National Parks and Wildlife Conservation (DNPWC), Nepal. At the time the project was handed over to the local people in 2010, some key actors claimed that the overall project had achieved most of its goals, including: the creation of good nurseries, which produce excellent seedlings that lead to planting with high survival rates; the development of sufficient resident forestry skills; the limitation of areas suitable for more planting due to land use pressure for agriculture, grazing and settlement; and adequate resident funding in the form of the Sagarmatha National Park Buffer Zone (SNPBZ) Programme. The involvement of multiple institutions such as SEHFC (donor), the HT NZ (INGO), and the HT NP (NGO) in a reforestation programme in a remote place in Nepal is an ideal opportunity to analyze how stakeholders perceived such a project. This study represents a stakeholder approach to evaluating the effectiveness of foreign aid and NGO involvement in an impacted community.

Research Methods: A qualitative research approach was chosen for the research. The effectiveness of foreign aid and NGO involvement was assessed by focusing on key informants in Khumbu community with regard to their experience and perceptions concerning the SNPFP project. Since the objectives and rationales of the foreign aid and NGO sector are

to serve communities, deliver services to them, and make them self-reliant after a certain period, community members are posited as the best sources 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. This study used both primary and secondary data. For the collection of secondary data, the researcher reviewed secondary sources including annual SNPFP reports, academic and research publications, newspaper articles, and legal and government publications. Participant observation, semi-structured interviews, and informal conversations were used to collect the primary data during the field visit. Accordingly, the researcher applied a community stakeholder approach based on the premise that multiple stakeholders' perceptions would reflect overall performance and cumulative impacts of the project in the impacted community. This study utilized the input from semi-structured interviews of 48 key informants and informal interviews/conversations from 31 participants. The semi-structured interviews were designed to obtain the perceptions of SNPFP, its impacts, and existing condition of the project after hand-over. Informal interviews collected broader information from heterogeneous informants. The collected primary and secondary data were organized, analyzed, and reported using NVivo 10 software.

Results - Stakeholders' perceptions on the performance of SNPFP:

Stakeholders were asked about their perceptions on the performance of SNPFP. A majority of those interviewed had mixed perceptions on the performance of SNPFP. On the one hand, they praised SNPFP for maintaining three nurseries in Khumbu—the basis for establishing many permanent plantation plots. On the other hand, they criticized SNPFP for not addressing issues for sustainable management of the plantation plots. However, a majority of respondents viewed SNPFP as playing a vital role in generating forest awareness among both local residents and tourists. They also pointed to shortcomings such as a lack of institution building at the local level, and carelessness in plantation procedures and post-plantation care due to the unavailability of technical foresters on a regular basis. The overall responses obtained on the issue of performance were coded on the basis of strength and weakness of the SNPFP. These aspects were further divided in to sub-aspects on the basis of the commonalities of the responses (Table 1).

Table 1. Perceived strength and weakness on the performance of SNPFP mentioned by stakeholders

Issue Coded for	Aspects	Sub-aspects
Performance of SNPFP	Strength of SNPFP	Establishment and management of nurseries Establishment of plantation plots Public awareness Publication of <i>high altitude forestry manual</i>
	Weakness of SNPFP	Post-plantation care Lack of technical foresters Lack of local institution building Weak reporting system

Stakeholders' perceptions on hand-over of SNPFP: In order to evaluate the SNPFP hand-over, stakeholders' perceptions on particular issues were obtained from the most relevant informants. For examples, questions regarding achievement of project goals and resident funding capability were posed to the SNP/SNPBZ officials, while questions regarding resident forestry skills, land use pressure, and ageing of employees were asked to the local people and project employees. Responses collected from different stakeholders were analyzed under the sub-aspects as shown in the Table 2.

Table 2. Aspects and sub-aspects mentioned by stakeholders on the hand-over of SNPFP

Issue Coded for	Aspects	Sub-aspects
Hand-over of SNPFP	Reasons of hand-over	Achievement of project goals Resident funding capability Resident forestry skills Land use pressure Ageing of employees
	Process of hand-over	Information dissemination and consultation Hand-over decision and hand-over event Management plan in transition period Evaluative study of SNPFP

Most of the local respondents and even nursery operators were uncertain about the project hand-over process. When the researcher probed about how SNPFP informed local people regarding the hand-over, one executive of the Himalayan Trust, Nepal revealed that key meetings – a proposed high altitude forestry workshop, Namche Bazaar and a high altitude forestry seminar in Kathmandu – to be conducted in September, 2009 were cancelled due to lack of time and budget. According to this executive, few formal and informal talks with local community representatives such as the Sherpa Himalayan Trust Advisory Committee, Buffer Zone Committee, Youth Groups, and Mothers Groups were conducted to disseminate the information of project hand-over. While the researcher inquired to all stakeholders whether they now aware of the status of SNPFP, 67% of the local stakeholder group (8 farmers, 7 lodge owners, and 7 school teachers) and 30% (3) of SNP/SNPBZ officials were not familiar with project hand-over. Furthermore, nursery operators had not received salaries for several months and were uncertain about who were now their employers. The researcher also had an opportunity to talk with an employee of a local NGO who attended the hand-over event. He reported that the project was handed over in a small meeting with neither a detailed work-out nor a future management plan. A majority of key informants pointed out that the SNPFP made no efforts to conduct a summative evaluation to assess program effectiveness in the Khumbu community at all. One project employee mentioned that the project manager talked about the importance of a social study of the project to determine the long-term success of the project. He also added that frequent discussion was conducted among the project employees regarding how local people appreciated the project. However, actual evaluation was not conducted due to a lack of time and money. Most of the respondents in the interviews complained that SNPFP officials did not return to see the project after its hand-over.

The researcher had an opportunity to meet with a top executive of the HT NZ in their Nepal office. During the short conversation, the researcher raised the issue of SNPFP evaluation. Responding, he indicated that evaluation is a responsibility of local government and SNP/SNPBZ. He further added, because of a lack of financial and human resources, SNPFP did not conduct post-project evaluations and surveys. Later, the researcher had an opportunity to interview a top executive of SEHFC. He suggested that SEHFC did not agree with the complete hand-over of SNPFP to the local people in 2010. He further added that SEHFC proposed other options for funding and continuation of the project for five more years. He blamed the HT NZ for the project hand-over which was insistently recommended

by the NZ-based project manager. He also disagreed with what the executive of the HT NZ said about the project.

Discussion and Conclusion: The exploration of stakeholders' perceptions of the NGO-led re-forestation project has important implications for the future planning and management of such projects. Findings indicate a high degree of heterogeneity in the comparison of key informants' responses among different stakeholder groups, which is consistent with the findings of many other foreign aid and NGO related studies (Ashley and Maxwell, 2001; Narayan *et al.*, 2005; Roka, 2012;). The study indicates a failure to incorporate activities and a 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 lack of attention to community capacity-building contributed to problems for project sustainability, which is consistent with findings of many authors who suggest the same reason for the failures of many development projects implemented by many INGOS and NGOs in developing countries (Chambers, 1993; Ashley and Maxwell, 2001). As criticized by Ronald (2010) and Suar *et al.* (2006) on the sustainability of NGO-led projects, a majority of SNPFP stakeholders were also concerned about the accountability and sustainability of SNPFP. Stakeholders complained about the procedures of the SNPFP hand-over. Most of the stakeholders were neither well-informed nor consulted appropriately before the project hand-over. Moreover, stakeholders were neglected by cancelling the proposed workshops and seminars, which were necessary to obtain public opinion regarding the hand-over. Most importantly, there was not much evidence that SNPFP worked to help communities become self-reliant and capable of management after the hand-over. All project employees of SNPFP were at retirement age, and no younger generations were trained so as to transfer the responsibility of the nurseries. Petras (1999) and Hudson (2001) also found a similar issue of uncertainty in the stage of project hand-over in their previous research on NGO-led development. This study also found conflicts among the participating agencies in different phases of the project. For example, 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 solid management plan.

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