



## Meeting Immediate Food Needs of the Resource Poor, and Contributing to Long-term Solution to Food Crisis in Rural Nepal

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*Local people participating in rural agriculture road construction in Naumule VDC, Dailekh*

### The Context

The natural calamities and almost negligible agricultural production coupled with hindrance in supplies due to bad road connectivity with district headquarters has caused a serious food deficit, affecting 6.4 million people in the remote areas of Nepal across the country, as World Food Programme (2008) reports. Hundreds of thousands of people in rural areas have been rendered entirely dependent on external food assistance. Of a total of 75 districts in the country, 33 are chronically food insecure, with about 2.5 million people in the rural parts of the country are in immediate need of food assistance. An additional 3.9 million people in the rural Nepal are at the risk of becoming insecure due to soaring food prices for the last several months.

Bearing in mind the above facts, Rural Reconstruction of Nepal (RRN) implemented a project entitled 'Food and Social Rehabilitation in Nepal (FAASRIN)' with the support from Welthungerhilfe (WHH) of the Federal Republic of Germany (BMZ) in 14 districts across the

country. The project aims at fighting hunger in a sustainable way and mitigating the immediate food crisis faced by the rural poor in general and those affected by the ever rising food price, natural disaster and conflict, in particular. This briefing paper highlights the RRN's perspective based on the lessons learned from the efforts to meeting the immediate food need of the poor and excluded people, while also paving a way for long-term solution to food crisis. The information presented in this paper is based on the field study of the project implemented in three districts, namely, Dailekh, Surkhet and Banke.

### Targeting the People Living in Food Scarcity

The project intentionally targeted the people who are vulnerable to food insecurity characterised by low income families, unemployed due to lack of opportunities in and around their villages, have no or limited formal education, and those affected by conflicts and women. In general, the families of target



*Newly constructed agriculture road under FASIRIN project in Kalidamar VDC, Surkhet*

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beneficiaries in the study areas live in hamlets that lack access to major basic needs such as sources of potable water and sanitation, irrigation water, road and market. Even those who own land are confined to operating subsistence farming; usually growing corn, wheat and millet or rice under rain-fed conditions.

Among the project beneficiaries, a big chunk of them are the peasant farmers who can provide for less than only six months a year of their family's food need, and hence are bound to sell their labour to obtain the rest. Such a circumstance has always been striking the minds of these people and therefore keeps asking them as what can be done to ensure food security. In order to cope with this situation, almost all the adult male members of the households are bound to go out for work away from their homes, even to India especially when not farming due to climate disruptions resulting in such adverse conditions as drought, landslides and floods. At the grassroots level, poverty coupled with increased demand for food, reduced per capita availability of arable land and irrigation water due to the ever rising population growth and the people's inability to afford to buy high-priced food grains are the principal root causes of food insecurity.

### **Responding to the Immediate Food Needs**

The project has been implemented in coordination with the relevant stakeholders especially the local governments and district level line agencies. The project is totally demand driven in nature, which places especial emphasis on its implementation with the ownership and leadership of the local self-help organisations and their needs. The local governments and line agencies help by providing legitimate support to

implementation as well as identifying the community beneficiaries and geographical areas requiring development support from the project. For undertaking a particular project activity the project beneficiaries are organised into a number of working groups.

During the project implementation, the beneficiaries, who are living in food scarcity, conflict as well as disaster affected people, marginal farmers, and seasonal migrants, are directly involved in the activities. The major project activities include: physical infrastructures construction (agriculture roads, irrigation canals, school and community building, and seed support). The project provides food (rice grain) in exchange for their physical labour to the project activities in their respective communities.

The geographical areas selected for the project are mostly secluded in the absence of road connectivity and basic infrastructures, which, in fact, are prerequisite to development. The implementation of the project contributed to meeting the immediate food needs of the poor, as they instantly received the rice-grains for their involvement in the project activities. The community people also have the feeling that the implementation of the project of this nature is very appropriate as many people in the project areas have already exhausted their coping mechanisms. During our field visit they distressingly articulated that if they are not able to get food or food not delivered in sufficient quantities, there is a possibility that they will go hungry. This is the central reason for the influx of the rural people in a massive scale into the project activities that provided them food grains as incentive, albeit for a short period.

### **Contributing to Long-term Solution to Food Crisis**

As mentioned above, the intent of the project is not just meeting the immediate need of food, but also dealing with the longer term solution towards food insecurity, besides the efforts for long-term social and economic impacts. In the project areas, there exist substantial potential for agricultural development. Translating this potentiality into reality, however, requires creating an enabling environment for the resource-poor farmers to link themselves with market centres for accessing necessary agricultural inputs including institutional credits. Our experience depicts that improving physical infrastructure, e.g., road network, forms one of the most essential prerequisites to creating such an environment. Therefore, the project invested in road building as one of the important attributes for accelerating agriculture



development process leading to food security.

The people in the project areas have greatly revered the project activities in the context of the present food crisis situation. They are of the view that the construction and improvement of infrastructure have served as a conduit to channel all the efforts to agricultural development. They also explicitly articulated that building of physical infrastructure would eventually contribute to minimisation of the transaction costs and market risks, which the poor farmers cannot afford on their own. Obviously, when the people cannot afford to create prerequisites on their own because of financial and physical constraints, they are most likely to be pushed towards the periphery of the development prospect.



*Road constructed in a remote village in Banke district*

The community people expect the positive results from the roads being constructed by the project in their locality for their social and economic development. As they realised, the implications of physical infrastructure are deep and even sometimes tragic. During the field visit it came to our notice that, very recently, a pregnant woman died on the way to health institution for treatment as she was being manually carried by the people owing to lack of motorable road linked to the highway. Similarly, the school-going children have been facing hard time in commuting to their schools from their village especially during the rainy season.

With the construction of the link-roads by the project, there has been improvement in the connectivity of the village with the major road heads and market centres thereby easing commutation for the people and hauling of goods for household needs and agricultural inputs. Due to the project, the narrow paths, locally known as *Goreto*, in the villages have been widened thus allowing the bullock-pulled carts and bigger vehicles to enter into the villages. These forward and backward linkages between the rural hinterlands and relatively advantaged peri-urban or urban areas resulted in easy market access for exchange of labours, access to health and educational institutions, supply of food and non-agricultural goods and services from outside for domestic consumption. As they expected, the access to market centres in the urban and peri-urban areas is going to be the key to increasing the incomes of rural people. The community people have realized that while building of road facilitates hauling of goods, it also reduces the cost of transportation as well as opens up opportunity for livelihoods and employment, eventually contributing to combating food insecurity problem.

### Gender Dimensions in the Project Implementation

There are more women than their men counterparts engaged in the project activity. The obvious reasons are: women are not in a position to go far away from their home place, as taking care of their children and elderly family members besides other regular farm and household chores are often designated as women's responsibility under the existing gender division of labour and due to the forced seasonal out-migration of male members elsewhere in quest of employment opportunities. The women folks also explained that they came forward just because they are more concerned about cooking food and feeding their children and family members. Despite all this, they did not lag behind in articulating that they were happy to have food grains being delivered by the project right in their villages without any gender-based discrimination.

### Implications for the Policy and Practice

While many factors have contributed to the existing episode of food insecurity problem in the communities being studied, the situation also undeniably portrays the feeble national political and economic system to allow these communities to achieve food sovereignty. Food sovereignty means that a country's citizens ensure that they have enough food and surplus to feed their nation on their own efforts. Viewed from this perspective, the implementation of this project with the construction of physical infrastructures could be considered as an endeavour towards creating a favourable environment for the communities to combat the short- and long-term food insecurity situations, while contributing to initiation of building the foundation for achieving food sovereignty at the

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*Women participation in agriculture road construction, Dailekh District*

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grassroots level. This is because without creation of an enabling environment it is often difficult to plan and implement development strategies aiming at enhancing the quality of life of the people.

Implicit in the lessons learned from the project is the need for strong emphasis on building infrastructures that facilitate and accelerate the agriculture production process, which in turn contribute to fight hunger and ensure food security. Among others, road connectivity is found to be an important explanatory factor to assure consistent, reliable and timely supply of materials and provide physical link required for human survival. Given the fact that the government has been relying on air transport for delivering grains to the remote areas, making investment by development agencies including the government on building physical infrastructures such as road for transporting grains using the ground would make more sense to better serve the people living in the remote villages. However, it is a fact that in considering the harsh geophysical situation of the country, scattered population and limited resources, it would be hard for the government alone to

perform all the development tasks. In this context, the government should avail the assistance of NGOs that have expertise and successful experience in the community development programmes for playing supplementary and complementary roles in the national development programmes.

Road building, in a country like Nepal, is an activity that requires involvement of people in physical terms as well, besides the material and non-material contributions. On the other hand, it is extremely difficult for the poor people with empty stomach to contribute in whatever terms. This implies the need for creating and providing incentives to the communities for securing their genuine participation in development activities. Such incentives could be in the form of short term relief materials (like food grains as in the case of this project) and the creation of infrastructure facilities to the long-term benefit of the people themselves.

As the study revealed, individual as well as household food security is affected by the actions and choices men and women make in producing food, earning income or acquiring assets, and feeding and caring for family members. It is, thus, crucial to ensure for women and men to have equitable access to and control over the resources needed to meet their respective roles and responsibilities. Clearly, what is also needed is overcoming the gender-based inequities in resource accessing and decision making in order to enhance women's contributions to food security, which eventually results in significant benefits to the entire household. This also implies that just involving women in development programs/projects is not sufficient; rather measures to empower them and changing the gender relations must be incorporated and implemented in the programmes that aim at mainstreaming a gender perspective in the national development process.

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*Rural Reconstruction Nepal (RRN), established in 1989, is a Nepali non-government, social development organisation involved in rural development, action-oriented research and policy advocacy focusing on peasants, poor women, dalits and indigenous nationalities, and other vulnerable communities through the process of facilitation, social mobilisation, empowerment and self-organisation. RRN's work is based on the four-fold approach to rural reconstruction covering: education to combat illiteracy and empower people to access their rights; sustainable livelihood to fight poverty; health to prevent disease, and self-government to overcome civic inertia.*