

# Food Aid And Social Rehabilitation In Nepal

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## Evaluation Report



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## **I. Summary**

### **1 Brief description of the project and framework conditions**

In August 2008, Nepal was hit by consecutive flooding in the eastern and western regions, affecting more than 250,000 people. The floods hit when the country was already reeling from drought-led crop failures, spiralling food and fuel prices, political strikes and road blockades. Moreover, in the course of the past year, an unprecedented rise in food prices seriously affected the eight million Nepalese living below or at the poverty line, expanding the numbers requiring food assistance from 1.3 million at the beginning of the year to 2.7 million by the end.

The project Food Aid and Social Rehabilitation in Nepal (FAASRIN) aims at improving food security and livelihoods of vulnerable populations, affected by floods, soaring food prices and conflicts. Assistance is focused on food for work schemes to construct/rebuild community infrastructure (mostly rural roads). Supplementary measures include seed distribution and food distribution to flood victims.

The project is funded by the Bundesministerium für wirtschaftliche Zusammenarbeit und Entwicklung (BMZ) and implemented by Welthungerhilfe in partnership with Rural Reconstruction Nepal (RRN) in 14 Districts in the Eastern, Central and Mid and Far Western Region of Nepal. The duration of the project is 6 months (Nov. 2008 – Apr. 2009).

### **2 Relevance and appropriateness**

The development of rural infrastructure, in particular roads, is very relevant. A reliable transport infrastructure is a prerequisite for poverty reduction and economic growth. Food for work provides short-term employment and temporary food security during the construction period but the impact on livelihoods is uncertain. Poverty and food insecurity is hardly ever a problem of food availability; rather it is a problem of access to food and having enough income to buy food. Providing cash for work or a combination of food and cash would have been a more appropriate mode of support.

The distribution of seed has limited relevance. The intervention is mainly supply-driven, because funds are available, without a clear strategy how this will lead to sustainable improvements of food security.

Despite certain limitations the project is also relevant to the objectives and policies of Welthungerhilfe, especially with regard to reducing poverty and hunger.

Moreover, there is a high degree of compatibility and convergence with the objectives of the Government and other humanitarian actors, given in the 2009 Consolidated Appeals Process (CAP) for Nepal and the GoN National Three-Year Interim Plan (2007/08-2009/10).

### **3 Connectedness and coherence**

Temporary food security through food for work and the focus on rural infrastructure delivered an immediate, visible and positive impact on the targeted communities. However, due to the short time period, in which the FFW project had to be implemented, certain shortcuts had to be taken in the project cycle. Not enough time could be allocated to social preparation and negotiation of beneficiary contributions and to introducing and strengthening mechanisms ensuring that project benefits will be sustained.

The local partner's good knowledge of the area, due to previous work and existing relationships with the communities, and the opportunity to provide follow-up support through RRN's other ongoing programmes might mitigate the risk of possible negative impacts of the short time frame to some extent.

In order to bridge the gap to development assistance follow-up interventions are required with a longer time frame and including complementary measures to capitalize on the investments and to ensure that the benefits can be sustained. To this end providing cash for work

or a combination of food and cash is likely more empowering and developmental than food aid and therefore more appropriate for promoting LRRD.

Coordination with other actors and stakeholders has been very effective at field level (district). But at central level initial contacts with GTZ and WFP were not further pursued and potential synergies with other projects and institutions in rural infrastructure construction and sustainable livelihood development were not explored.

#### **4 Efficiency**

The overall efficiency of the project in terms of cost categories repartition corresponds to the norms for a project, which is centred on relief (FFW) combined with investment in productive infrastructure development. 80 % of the funds are spent for activities (food, wages and material) directly benefiting the recipients.

By making use of the existing infrastructure of RRN, the costs for vehicles and equipment are minimal only and the overall cost-effectiveness of the project appears to be high.

A comparison of the average cost of road construction with DOLIDAR estimates shows that the roads constructed by the FAASRIN project are considerably more cost-effective (50-60% lower than DOLIDAR estimates). Whereas these figures need to be taken with a pinch of salt since the technical standards may vary, there is obviously a high level of cost-effectiveness.

Still there is scope for improvement: FAASRIN paid workers a fixed daily rate based on attendance, whereas other major actors engaged in rural road construction in Nepal compensate labourers on a task work basis, i.e. based on the amount of work they accomplish. This creates a major incentive for work to progress quickly and is generally considered more cost-effective.

The monitoring and reporting system tends to focus primarily on statistics of the social make-up (e.g. ethnicity) and on physical aspects of project implementation. Other issues such as context, problems encountered, lessons learnt and wider impact of the works are not taken into consideration. Moreover, it appears that the logical framework, prepared at the inception of the project, has not been used as a framework for monitoring and project management

#### **5 Effectiveness**

In spite of the difficult political and economical environment the project has gone a long way in reaching its objective to improve (temporary) food security of vulnerable households participating in the FFW schemes.

By the end of February 2009, the project has approved 123 projects with a total budget of Euro 811'773) including 61 rural roads, 23 school buildings, 10 community buildings, 3 drinking water schemes, 5 irrigation schemes, 9 culverts and dam constructions, 7 river training schemes and seed support at 5 locations. 53 projects have been completed and the remaining ones are expected to be completed within the project period (by end of March 2009).

Due to the provision that more than 50% of the funds had to be used for food-for-work (FFW), mainly labour-intensive road projects have been implemented. Whereas for other projects, like irrigation and drinking water schemes, more funding in the form of cash would have been required to pay for material.

The total number of households benefiting from rural infrastructures is given as 42'212. This means that the project has achieved more than double the estimated number (20'000 hh).

Other important achievements are: (a) construction of 157 km rural roads, (b) development of 325 ha irrigation land and (c) generation of more than 388'000 person-days employment.

The successful implementation of the FAASRIN project is the result of a "perfect match" of the two partners involved: On the one hand, the project could benefit from the presence of RRN in the proposed 14 districts, with experienced staff, operational infrastructure and systematic implementation procedures being in place. On the other hand, RRN, facing the chal-

lence of a number of projects being phased out during 2009, could make use of the FAASRIN project to absorb redundant staff.

However, there were also some challenges and factors hindering the effective execution and sustainability of the projects. The major constraint was the short project time frame, resulting in things being done in a rush, without adequate time for the planning, assessing of the context and the appropriateness of the intervention, and adequate consideration of sustainability issues.

## 6 Effects and impacts

Road construction has the potential to make a significant impact on household food security through direct employment (FFW), improved security of movement, reduced transport costs and improved marketing – bringing higher prices to producers.

Improved accessibility throughout the year results in an increase in land value, investments in new enterprises, improved access to hospitals and education, and provides local employment opportunities.

Most of the workforce employed are women (60%). This does not only generate more income but enhances also women's self-esteem, as they are no longer financially dependent on their husbands.

The project supports '*user committees*' at all sites. They are responsible to mobilize people for construction work, handling and distribution of food and construction material at the project site and keeping of inventories and records on all activities and, eventually, for the maintenance of the project. At this stage their capacities and effectiveness are difficult to assess. However, it is quite obvious that more support and capacity building will be needed that these institutions will sustain and provide benefits to their members.

RRN uses environmentally friendly road construction techniques ('green road' approach) that protect the natural environment, its agricultural potential, and its natural resources against excessive erosion.

At this stage of the project it is too early to assess, whether or not the achievements will be sustained. However, a number of factors and characteristic features can be identified, which either enhance or lessen the chances of sustainability.

Enhancing factors are, among others: (a) infrastructure schemes, constructed under the project, are based on requests and felt-needs of the target communities; (b) RRN's positive image with the people as a result of tangible benefits provided to a large number of communities; (c) effective participation of the communities in the selection and management of projects and direct controlling ('*public audit*') of financial and material resources; (d) communities were encouraged to approach other agencies including Government institutions and authorities to access resources and to ensure future maintenance support; (e) high degree of compatibility and convergence with local and national development strategies; (f) all schemes are technically, economically and ecologically sound and socially appropriate.

Risk factors, hindering the chances of sustainability, are: (a) The project time frame was too short and led to certain shortcuts in project implementation, which risk jeopardizing sustainability; (b) the organisational and technical capacities and capabilities of '*user groups*' and '*user committees*' are still weak; and (c) low levels of community contributions do not create ownership of the projects and responsibility for maintenance.

## 7 Annual cross-cutting theme

"Helping people help themselves" is Welthungerhilfe's annual crosscutting theme in 2008. Self-help is understood as initiative to create or shape own livelihood, while supporting self-help as an approach is based on empowerment of disadvantaged groups. In this context, poverty is also understood as a lack of opportunities to realise own potentials because of political, social or economic constraints.

The project was not planned with an explicit focus on self-help. Nevertheless, the actual practise in implementation is in accord with most of the principles underlying the self-help approach of Welthungerhilfe.

## **8 Most important recommendations**

### ***General recommendation***

The overall recommendation of this evaluation to WHH and RRN is to capitalize on the experiences of the FAASRIN project and continue their partnership, guided by the concept of 'Linking Relief, Rehabilitation and Development' (LRRD).

The recommendations below outline the main strategic components of a future project and necessary changes to increase its overall impact and effectiveness:

### ***Project scale and coverage***

Focus support on remote and disadvantaged VDC's in 1-2 Districts, with a time frame of at least 2-3 years.

### ***Productive infrastructure with complementary development measures***

Support communities to construct and maintain productivity enhancing infrastructures – with a focus on rural roads and small-scale irrigation - as the main pillars of the intervention. Link infrastructure with complementary development opportunities

### ***Rural roads ('green roads')***

- Develop rural road and trail networks using road-building technology based on 'Green Road' principles.
- Build political consensus with local authorities and stakeholder communities to ensure that the roads become part of the District Transport Master Plan.
- Use collective financing from the central, district, and village governments and communities to create a sense of local ownership and responsibility towards maintenance.
- Compensate labourers on a task work basis, rather than by a fixed daily rate.
- Promote and strengthen user self-help mechanisms for maintenance from the very beginning of the construction. Build local capacities and skills for maintenance, rehabilitation, and upgrading works.
- Conduct public audits and erect signboards, providing information on project plans and expenditures, at all project sites.

### ***Small scale irrigation schemes***

- Promote construction/rehabilitation of farmer-managed small-scale irrigation schemes and non-conventional irrigation technologies, using similar approaches as outlined above for road construction including participation of the beneficiaries and other stakeholders in all phases of the project cycle.
- Build capacities and skills in techniques and methods of irrigated agricultural production.
- Establish 'user groups' or 'irrigation management committees' at all sites and build their capacities to manage and monitor construction work and, subsequently, ensure operation and maintenance of the scheme.

### ***Complementary measures***

- *Improved access to seed:* Instead of direct seed distribution, preference to be given to local production of improved seeds, seed fairs, seed vouchers, etc.
- *Food and income from natural resource management:* Promote livelihood/income generation activities through productive and sustainable management of natural resources.

- *Link production to marketing systems* through promoting quality standards, strengthening competitive marketing chains, developing appropriate rural-urban linkages and involving private sector.
- *Market-oriented vocational skill training* with direct linkage to gainful employment for youths; income generation and employment from micro-enterprises.
- *Social protection*: Provide access to micro-credit or conditional cash transfers (to build household assets), asset transfers (e.g. revolving livestock funds), etc.

### **Towards improved effectiveness of project implementation**

Based on the experiences of the FAASRIN project the following recommendations, pertaining to the effectiveness of project implementation, are made:

- Review and change the balance between cash, food, combination of food plus cash and other support as the context changes.
- Don't leave impact evaluation to external consultants only. Make monitoring for impact part of project reporting; monitor against indicators rather than physical targets only. Use the *logframe* as a frame for project implementation and monitoring.
- In addition to routine data gathering, carry out surveys at reasonable intervals, e.g.: in-depth assessment of the status/performance of the '*user groups/committees*', and use and impact of outcomes (roads, irrigation schemes).
- Analyse the reasons for success and failure and use this information to improve future action; share experience with other actors and consolidate and adjust implementation modalities based on lessons learnt and best practices

## **9 General conclusions**

The focus on rural infrastructure resulted in highly visible outputs from project activities. The tangible achievements of the project are recognised and appreciated by the communities and local government authorities alike. This gives a positive image to the implementing organisation and provides a good basis for future interventions in the area.

However, FFW did reduce food insecurity only temporarily; during the time labourers were working. Sustainable long-term improvements require complementary support measures based on better understanding of the livelihood situation and the constraints poor people face in accessing and utilizing existing potentials.

For administrative and financial reasons the project had to be implemented within 6 months. The project time frame was too short and led to certain shortcuts in project implementation. Such kind of short-term interventions, without adequate follow-up, risk being not sustainable.

Funding being linked to relief measures (food, seed distribution) bears the risk that the interventions become resource-driven rather than demand-driven. The provision that more than 50% of the funds had to be spent for food resulted in a bias for labour-intensive projects (rural roads) and limited the choices to effectively respond to other felt needs of the communities.

People should be given various financial and material options, so that they can choose what works best for them. The decision to provide food, cash, a combination of both or something else should be based on an objective problem analysis and clear aims and not on what resources are available, what the agency has the capacity to distribute or the donor's preferences.