

Desperate for cash – long-term: ‘Beyond the Road’ initiatives

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Imagine: You are a farmer in rural Nepal. You own a fairly comfortable house. It is simple; it provides you with shelter from the monsoon rains and protects you against the harsh winter winds. You grow potatoes, maize and barley on your meagre two-hectares of land. Your mother, your wife and two children, your brother and his wife all live together in an extended family. Your children go to school; you need clothes, food and medicine for the family. The harvest from your land covers your family's basic needs for four months in a year, but you need extra food and are desperate for a cash income.

The nearest road head is a three-hour walk over difficult terrain, the health post is some distance and the primary school for your two children is in the neighbouring village. The only comfort you and your family share is a simple radio and a solar panel, one square-foot in size, which powers two 40-watt light bulbs.

Being a Dalit¹, you are likely to be socially discriminated against by the system. You and your family have only restricted access to religious activities. You have a lower social status and you lag behind in education and in access to other opportunities. You find it extremely difficult to benefit from government services, and employment is not easy to come by.

Having no vocational skills you have three options to better your life: a) You and/or your brother seasonally migrate to Kathmandu, India or the Middle East where you can earn up to a \$150/month for simple work, or b) you consult a money lender and most likely have to sell another piece of your property within two years to repay the debt, or c) if you are lucky, a development programme with a longer-term employment and livelihoods component invests in your community.

What can the District Roads Support Programme do for this farmer?

1. Dalits are people from castes who are deprived economically, socially, culturally, educationally, etc. They are also discriminated against as an 'untouchable' caste.

The District Roads Support Programme (DRSP) is a programme jointly set-up and funded by the Government of Nepal, the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation and six district administrations. The programme generates about 50,000 person-days of employment per district per year, or about 80 days employment for each individual worker.

The DRSP Programme Support Unit (PSU) directly hires engineers, sub-engineers and social workers and deposes them to the partner districts. The PSU coaches the members of the district administration and their staff in rural road construction techniques, road maintenance management and social mobilisation for road works. The PSU trains and works with district engineers and sub-engineers on the technical and managerial aspects of road construction; acting as partner, trainer and mentor in district transport planning, road selection, road alignment, survey, design, resettlement and land compensation. DRSP assists district staff in solving environmental issues and trains them in the selection and mobilisation of the local workforce. Together, DRSP and its district partners quantify the road construction works, distribute the work to the road construction groups, supervise construction, arrange for the insurance of workers, and ensure that they receive timely and fair payment. In short, DRSP, on a technical level, is a sound operation.

As a programme, DRSP is poverty focused, targeting rural poor people and the socially discriminated. DRSP identifies and facilitates employment for thousands of women (40% of the workforce are women), who generally lack personal property and other income opportunities. Women's wages are most likely to be re-invested within their community many times over.

Working with the local community and involving them at the programme management level is the key to a successful and long-term impact. For that DRSP forms inclusive Local Road Coordination Committees and User Committees. The Coordination Committees are part of the decision-making body for the selection of road alignment and help to solve unavoidable land disputes. Local Road User Committees are part of the road construction management team and play a key role in the formation and mobilisation of road construction groups. They oversee and assist in supervising works, distribute wages to construction workers and, most importantly, they make the programme more transparent to the public by organising public hearings and public audits.

Reaching Beyond the Road

At the outset of the Programme, it was realised that the social benefits of rural road work were relatively short-lived. With that in mind, DRSP developed community development activities to benefit people 'Beyond the Road'. The Programme invests up to 15% of its road construction budget in such activities. DRSP trains local people to facilitate awareness raising programmes for the poorest and most deprived in the community. In addition, DRSP focuses on raising community issues related to social and gender discrimination, children's rights and education, community resource management, health and sanitation, girl trafficking and HIV AIDS.

DRSP encourages workers to save the money they earn from road construction and invest it in income generating activities. It facilitates the workers to organise groups, start saving and mobilise funds for investment activities, whilst maintaining proper records. The Programme provides cash to groups targeting the poor as seed money to initiate income generating activities. Homogenous groups of 20 to 30 villagers decide

for themselves what kind of activity they want to undertake. The most popular activities are goat-raising, beekeeping, off-season vegetable gardening, soap making and thanka painting (religious scroll painting). Groups are trained by DRSP social mobilisers or through specialised staff from government departments or the private sector.

Within a few months of joint effort by DRSP and local communities, the settlements within the DRSP road corridor have better sanitation facilities; children and adults alike are more conscious of health, education and other related issues; the villagers organise themselves into groups to work and manage simple projects; women start raising their issues publicly and participate in community development activities; and, most importantly, the partnership between DRSP and the villagers is strengthened. Many savings and credit groups formed by road construction groups have registered as cooperatives and are collaborating with private and government institutions. They have increased their membership and accumulated substantial amounts of money, which has been invested at the local level. Now the poor people need not go to the money lender to ask for money at high charge rates.

Despite the undoubted benefits of DRSP, it has not achieved the wide coverage and long-term economic impact that was initially hoped for. For example, some of the income generating activities (such as soap making) did not lead to long-term economic benefits. A few villagers gained extra skills, but the rural markets are too small and the necessary effort and investment is too large to make such activities economically viable. However, DRSP can relate plenty of individual success stories within the communities.

DRSP realises that it has to improve on what is traditionally available in the area. In future, DRSP will focus on agro-based skill development so as to increase local production. A second option is construction skill development for potential migrant workers. This will lead to gainful employment in the construction industry in Nepal and abroad. Towards this end, DRSP has initiated a partnership with an SDC-supported skill development programme. It will be a challenge for the Programme to promote and facilitate meaningful semi-skilled employment abroad. It would be a great achievement for DRSP if it could equip local youths looking to migrate for work with skills to enable them to earn a reasonable wage, save and invest in their local community in rural Nepal.



For further information on this programme visit www.drspnepal.org or contact josef.zimmermann@drspnepal.org

Few impressions from the District Roads Support Programme



Alignment selection, public audit and public hearing attract huge masses. Interest and expectation towards the DRSP programme are immense.



Villagers with the help of a social mobiliser form construction groups of 20 to 25 people. Works are quantified and paid on a measurement basis. This system favours the hard working for their effort. Male and female workers receive equal wages for equal work.



Beyond road activities concentrate on confidence building, health and hygiene, women's and children's rights, skill development and saving and investment activities. Income generating activities focus on boosting agricultural production and animal husbandry.