

Efforts of CSOs in Enhancing Access of Dalits to Services, Resources and Development in Nepal

Mohan Singh Sunar
Executive Director
NNDSWO

Cooperation and solidarity between civil society organizations (CSOs) and the government in mainstreaming the issues of excluded groups into development process is commendable in Nepal. This has enabled Dalits to have their greater access to services, resources and development opportunity. Dalit CSOs' integrated intervention for empowerment, inclusion and people's mobilization and continued advocacy for distinct recognition of Dalit issues demanding for special Dalit development programs has been crucial to influence policies and ameliorate economic, social and cultural rights of Dalits. Government's openness and cooperation has encouraged the move, accelerated the process and heightened the progress. Dalit CSOs' joint lobby and regular sharing of the situation of Dalits has gained support and solidarity from international donor community including UN agencies. This process was started from later 1990s and got momentum from mid of the last decade. It is still continued.

Legal and institutional frameworks

With the restoration of democracy in 1990 particularly from the 8th periodic plan (1992-1997), the government of Nepal started targeted programme as a strategy of poverty reduction. It also adopted a policy to mobilize NGOs in development works and recognized their complementary role in the development activities. Enactment of Local Self-governance Act, 1998, created an enabling policy environment at local level for enhancing access of Dalits and excluded groups in the development process and resources. The establishment of Committee for Uplifting Excluded, Oppressed and Dalits (CUEPD) and National Dalit Commission (NDC) were also significant move. From the 10th plan (2002-2007), the government has started to distinct development programme and budget for Dalits in inclusion framework. These policies have been reflected by subsequent annual budgets and periodic plan as well. The 10th plan distinctly defined its long term vision to raise the living standard of Dalits and neglected communities by empowering them on the basis of equality, and mainstream them into the development efforts. This is in line with human right framework which has been the milestone for inclusive development of Dalits. These key legislative measures, policies and programme strategies adopted by the government were the outcome of increased interaction and consultation between the government and CSOs. Accordingly, it created more space for CSOs and fostered policy dialogue and debate.

Description of key methods, means, and strategies of the practices

From early of the last decade Dalit civil society leaders as well as Dalits political leaders seem more vocal for the socio-economic and development rights of Dalits. Dalit CSOs developed their capacity and networks and became more vibrant in fact based advocacy. Different studies on Dalit sectors accelerated from CSOs as well as the government. Involvement of Dalit scholars in such study was an added value. Dalit CSO's strategy to engage development experts, sociologists and planners in the study and discourse and thus sensitize them on the Dalit situation was an effective practice which ultimately influenced the policy. Initiatives of budget analysis from Dalits perspectives and debate with policy makers notably sensitized the policy makers. Different studies and analyses in Dalit situation have helped for evidence based dialogue/advocacy and planning as well. Dalit CSOs efforts to disseminate the budget informations and policy provisions of the government enabled Dalit people for claiming their rights and entitlements and in accessing resources and services at local level.

Federating and networking of Dalit organizations increased their influence in policy advocacy. Consortium-based programme development and implementation initiatives by the national level Dalit CSOs has strengthened their capacity, and became instrumental in building synergy. In this context, Dalit Empowerment and Inclusion Project (DEIP) a joint initiative of six organizations, Dalit Empowerment

Programme (DEP) by three organizations and National Consultation for Constitution Rights by 16 organizations were implemented by Dalit CSOs. Major Dalit NGOs themselves have been operating in network-based organizational structure with wider presence. Collaboration and cooperation of Dalit CSOs with Dalit wings of political parties have further helped in consolidating Dalit movement making stronger voice.

Organizing Dalit people in VDC and district level alliances and their connection to national level organizations and alliances remained good channel to push the local issues to policy level. Such alliances are also mobilized for implementation monitoring and create development demand at local level.. Dialogue between grassroots people and local bodies of the government through such alliances are effective mechanism to increase interaction and linkages with right holders Dalits and duty bearer. Such alliances are also effective to have voice of the people and hold local agencies accountable.

The dialogue of grass Dalit people with government official has developed local Dalits people's say for local budget and a feeling of responsibility among government agencies have been observed. Provision to include Dalits in VDC/DDC council as well as local functional groups such as user's groups ensures their participation in plan implementation. Dalit CSOs strategy to develop the leadership and advocacy skill of local Dalit leaders has been instrumental to influence the development process.

Similarly, lobbying and advocacy with planning commission, development experts and political leaders continued. Dalit CSOs developed common agendas through wider consultation with grass root level Dalit people and submitted to the policy makers both at local and national level. While advocating the Dalit issues, non-confrontational advocacy strategies were adopted. Dalit SCOs are also lobbying with other CSOs and development agencies for inclusion and monitor Dalit focused programe.

Some key tangible impacts of the practices

Some of the tangible impacts observed in the lives of Dalit community in Nepal are presented below:

- As results of less confrontational attitudes, continuing interaction, discourse and exchange of thoughts between the Dalit CSOs and the government official from grassroots to national level has developed a value of more consultative approach to policy development and implementation.
- The government has been progressively made distinct provisions for Dalits in order to ensure their access to services, resources and development. The mandatory provisions to local bodies of the government to allocate certain percentage of their budget for the development of excluded groups have ensured a minimum access of Dalits to the resources. Initially, by policy, there was just a provision to give priority to backward groups in local development plan which did not work for Dalits. After the lobby of Dalit CSOs and people, government developed and subsequently amended the VDC/DDC budget operating guidelines making progressive provisions. Now there is provision for local bodies to allocate at least 35 % of their programme budget for excluded groups;
- The interaction and engagement of Dalit CSOs to the government organizations from local to national level has been communication channel to decision makers and a feedback mechanism for the development of pro-Dalit policies and programmes;
- The scholarship programme of the government benefits around 1.7 Million Dalits students of grade 1 to 10 annually which has contributed to increased access of Dalits to education services. Likewise higher education scholarship programme of CUEPD benefits more than 10 thousands Dalit students annually.
- At least 139,732 Dalits HHs have been able to access the resources from Poverty Alleviation Fund (PAF) which is 30% of PAF's total outreach.
- Peoples' Housing programme gives priority to Tarai/Madhesi Dalits who are mostly landless and hardcore poor;

Enabling environment and conditions for success

- The government policy to collaborate with NGOs as development partner provided working space for the CSOs which were important condition for these achievements.
- Openness and responding nature of the government ease the debate and exchange of thoughts between stakes.
- International commitment for human rights, equality and non-discrimination were the obligations for Nepal government and advocacy tools for CSOs.
- Financial as well as vocal support from donor and international community helped to increase outreach and build the capacity.
- Rights based movement in development paradigm and solidarity from larger civil society against exclusion and discrimination created conducive environment for pushing the agendas of Dalits.
- Political movement against exclusion and marginalization itself helped to push the agendas of Dalits ahead.
- Same passion and understanding between Dait CSO and Dalit wings of political parties helped to politicize the issues of Dalits and include in the agendas of political parties too.

Challenges and obstacles

- Due low/no representation of Dalits in decisive and implementation position and mechanism of the government has been bottleneck to translate the government's commitment and policies into practices.
- Lack of government capacity to deliver services and arrange adequate resources and ineffective monitoring mechanism both in the government as well as in CSOs were another challenges for higher level achievement.
- Academia and skilled manpower of varied fields are still to develop within the Dalit community in Nepal. This in some cases remains a constraint for critical assessment of the situation and engagement of Dalits so as to effectively influence the process and outcome as well.
- It is constraints for Nepali Dalit movement that it lacks adequate research and study on Dalit filed. There is a problem of data and information for informed debate and dialogue.

Three key recommendations for similar practices/initiatives that can be replicated in the future

- Create space for CSOs in development and cooperation between CSOs and the government
- Carry out informed debate and discourse based on research and study;
- Organize people for voicing together through alliances and networks