

OPERATIONAL CONSIDERATIONS FOR DESIGNING AND MOBILIZING COMMUNITY-BASED GROUPS FOR IMPROVING FOOD SECURITY AND NUTRITION

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Abstract

The role of community in local development has been a cornerstone of Community Driven Development in developing countries. In Nepal, community-based groups are an integral part of many large-scale programs, which use a range of social mobilization strategies to achieve their objectives. A recently conducted operations research of major food security and nutrition (FSN) projects in Nepal (*Study of Operational Strategies to Reduce Malnutrition in Nepal*) points to the importance of such strategies and offers practical lessons on operational considerations for project planners and implementers. This research brief highlights some of the major classifications of community-based groups and emphasizes the importance of considering the influence of inclusion and incentives (free grants, loan grants, “software” and “hardware” provisions) on group performance. Groups, once having built credibility in the community, can become a multi-purpose platform for implementing development activities, addressing socio-cultural constraints, and collective bargaining. Given the range of development projects and activities at the local level, the study finds the benefits of joint-programming to harmonize interventions being implemented to benefit common beneficiaries.

The mobilization of community-based groups in local-level development has been an important strategy in developing countries. In Nepal, a range of social mobilization approaches have been implemented to achieve project objectives, from improving nutrition and livelihoods to increasing agricultural production and food security. While quantitative evidence for their effectiveness is being generated through ongoing quantitative evaluation efforts, it is useful to explore the operational challenges and opportunities associated with common modalities, particularly in relation to improving the food security and nutrition (FSN) landscape. With this rationale, this policy brief summarizes key findings from operations research, which identifies three common social mobilization modalities applied in large scale projects in Nepal.

A. Project implementation groups

The first modality consists of projects shifting the responsibility for implementing community projects to a “team” of community members. The Sunaula Hazar Din (SHD)-Community Action for Nutrition Project mobilized Rapid Results for Nutrition Initiative (RRNI) teams to design and implement 100-day projects (ranging from activities related to creating Open Defecation Free environments, kitchen gardening, chicken rearing, to awareness raising for adequate nutrition of adolescents, pregnant and lactating mothers and children especially below two years) geared towards increasing demand for nutrition services. One critical

component of the mobilization strategy was to provide conditional cash grants to cover the costs of the project, with the assumption that financial constraints often prevent people from adopting new health and nutrition practices. Key operational learnings from the implementation of SHD experience include the following:

- ◆ **Balancing team inclusion and team performance.** RRNI team members are selected for the duration of a specific sub-project. While forming a RRNI team for a new sub-project, facilitators encourage communities to change the leadership and membership to grant opportunity for other members with the goal of inclusion and building capacity of more community members. While the intention is commendable, some projects seemed to perform better under the same membership and leadership due to carrying over of learnings and skills to the next projects. Hence, it is important to ensure that inclusivity provisions do not hamper performance, and thus the achievement of results.
- ◆ **Influence of conditional grants in team decision making and performance incentives:** Conditional grants are crucial for communities who may not have pre-requisite resources to adopt a new practice (for example, resources to build latrines to stop open defecation). However, grants seem to compel teams to choose more high-cost “hardware” projects, such as latrine construction, over “software” projects, such as breastfeeding awareness.

- ◆ Because there is minimum financial risk for teams, the “free” grants may provide limited incentives for performance, especially when team members are working for external beneficiaries.

B. Profession-specific groups

The second modality is to organize people by a common profession, such as farming. Farmer groups are a preferred modality for national agriculture programs, which form groups of farmers to provide technical capability building programs, develop agri-infrastructure projects, and build producer associations for market-linkages. Implementation experience from the Agriculture and Food Security Program (AFSP) and USAID’s Knowledge-based Integrated Sustainable Agriculture and Nutrition (KISAN) Project provides the following key learnings:

- ◆ **Unity for collective bargaining:** One of the advantages of joining profession-based groups, such as a farmers group, is the unity of members to address shared challenges, often by collectively raising voice and seeking support from public agencies, NGOs or community members. For sustainability of the group, members highlight the importance of being individually active and united as a group.
- ◆ **Joint-programming in provision of services and goods and commodities:** Some projects provide subsidies and in-kind support for farmers while others are limited to services. Although services, such as technical training, are valued by the groups, people prefer hardware items. In such cases, joint-programming by multiple projects through the same group can help manage expectations while harmonizing and complementing activities at the group level.

C. Women-focused groups

The third modality for social mobilization is through gender-specific groups, such as mothers’ groups. The mothers’ groups have been formed, mostly with purposes of improving health outcomes through:

- ◆ **Capability expansion beyond health and nutrition:** Although mothers’ groups have been historically engaged in promoting health and nutrition, experience has shown that their capability can be expanded to include livelihood development, demonstration of model farms, increasing adoption of good agricultural practices, and savings and credit services.
- ◆ **Maneuvering socio-cultural context to bring change:** While operating within the socio-cultural context of a

community, women often face the challenge of convincing more senior members of their household, such as their mothers-in-law, to adopt new practices like exclusive breastfeeding or washing hands. In such scenarios, members can build their legitimacy and technical authority by association with the group and resource persons, such as social mobilizers or female community health volunteers.

Conclusion

This brief discusses useful operational considerations for identifying possible social mobilization strategies in FSN project programming. It is important to consider the influence of inclusion and incentives (free grants, loan grants, “software” and “hardware” provisions) on group performance. Once a group is operational and has established its functional credibility, it can become a multi-purpose platform for implementing development activities, addressing socio-cultural constraints, and collective bargaining. Given the range of development projects and activities at the local level, joint-programming at the village level through relevant groups can help complement different interventions being implemented to benefit a common group of beneficiaries.

Full report: “Study of Operational Strategies to Reduce Malnutrition in Nepal”. Website: <http://documents.worldbank.org/curated/en/474451508933829359/Study-of-operational-strategies-to-reduce-malnutrition-in-Nepal>

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