



German NGOs and Political Strife in Nepal

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German-Nepal relationship at all levels – governmental, nongovernmental or popular – has always been very friendly, harmonious and marked by mutual respect and understanding. This is attributable to the long bilateral relationship and especially the existence of numerous small organisations aimed at supporting the Nepali people's development efforts at the grassroots level and promoting friendship between the two peoples. The founding in 1967, in Cologne, of German-Nepal Friendship Association, the first bilateral organisation, was akin to the initiation of diplomatic relations between the two countries. Since then, a relatively large number of voluntarily-run non-governmental organisations (NGOs) that are active in Nepal or on Nepal's behalf have emerged and their number keeps growing steadily. When the first conference on such NGOs was held in Bonn, in 1995, only about 25 such organizations were known to exist. Nine years later, now, this number has increased to 50, and a few new ones are born each year. This is also an indication that the German NGOs have so far succeeded in steering clear of the ongoing political strife in Nepal, keeping focused on their humanitarian goals.

Involvement Patterns

Most of the German NGOs are registered as charitable organisations and generate their funds in Germany from donations to run various support programs in Nepal. Located mainly in the German States of North Rhine Westphalia, Bavaria, Baden Wurttemberg and Hessen, these NGOs are volunteer-operated and thus have virtually no administrative costs.

These NGOs differ from each other primarily in terms of their fund-raising capacity and the number of projects initiated and supported by them in Nepal. Measured in this manner, the German-Nepal Help Association is the largest one. There are a few others that belong to this category. Most interestingly, the largest group of NGOs consists of those which are focussing on children, including orphanages, and run child-sponsoring programs for school children and provide support for building school houses in Nepal. The third group of NGOs is concerned with the health sector. They finance health posts, small hospitals and operate mobile health camps. A few newcomers are focussing on the community development sector. In recent years, the tendency has been toward founding NGOs for specific projects such as the building of a particular school, health post, solar lighting or drinking-water supply for a given village. Almost all of the German NGOs are basically geared to humanitarian

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purposes. Their involvement in political and civic education areas is virtually zero. The only forum for human rights that had German involvement was dissolved a few years ago. This area is understandably left to big, complex professional organisations or foundations.

The activities of German NGOs have been concentrated mainly in the country's central region - Kathmandu Valley and its wider vicinity. This is not surprising if we consider the relative accessibility of the region and greater awareness of the area among tourists and other visitors coming to Nepal. Coincidentally, the region is home to a huge proportion of the national population. It should be noted here that an increasing trend among the visitors to Nepal to visit remote areas, in response to a government campaign, was reversed by the ongoing political strife in Nepal.

Most NGOs cooperate/collaborate or partner with one or more of the local NGOs for achieving their respective objectives or project implementation. However, there are a few NGOs that prefer to carry out their project implementation in Nepal by themselves. The German-Nepal Friendship Association, on its part, believes and advocates that NGOs operating in Nepal should collaborate/partner with local Nepali NGOs since this will, among other things, help the local people to be self-sustaining and enhance the probability of the project's success or effectiveness. The majority of the NGOs have agreed that their involvement in any project should be for a limited period.

SWC and Coordination of NGOs

In view of the growing number of international NGOs (INGOs) as well as national NGOs, His Majesty's Government (HMG) of Nepal established a high-level, autonomous Social Welfare Council (SWC) in 1977. SWC's function is to coordinate and facilitate all social welfare actions in Nepal. Presently, SWC largely depends on an annual grant from HMG of approximately Rupees 16,500,000, which covers the salary and benefits of SWC's 165 staff.

The overall number of INGOs and NGOs has dramatically risen, especially since 1991. It is estimated that the number of national NGOs affiliated with SWC has shot up from 219 in 1991 to 15,038 at present. Overall, an estimated 30,000 NGOs are registered with the Chief District Officer's offices all over the kingdom. At the same time, the number of INGOs has increased from 54 in 1991 to 106 INGOs registered with SWC and 26 registered elsewhere. Reportedly, there is practically no renewal record for the 30,000 NGOs registered with the District offices. In other words, the number of current and functioning NGOs may be much smaller than 30,000.

Reports on the performance of SWC suggest that it has mostly failed to fulfil its goal. The reasons identified are of structural, technical and political nature. SWC has not been able to bring all NGOs and INGOs under its umbrella, although HMG (through National Planning Commission) has directed that all INGOs be registered with and coordinated by only one institution. Questions are increasingly being raised regarding the transparency of NGO and INGO programs, particularly resource accountability issues. In addition to accountability, the question of sustainability of the program

implemented by NGOs and INGOs is being raised because of the low-level involvement of many INGOs in various sectors.

On the other hand, SWC has been widely criticized for its lack of one-window policy and lengthy registration process. Its policy of dealing only with INGOs committing themselves to invest US \$50,000 or more excludes a large number of INGOs engaged in Nepal. At the same time, there is no similar agency to coordinate the work of those INGOs that are too small for SWC. The few associations of the local NGOs - even if they began to function effectively - could hardly substitute SWC. SWC has never been effective in assisting INGO volunteers in visa or customs matters. It has failed to institute a systematic, regular auditing of the performance of INGOs.

Clearly, these issues and shortcomings have to be carefully examined. Hopefully, these issues will be resolved by the proposed Social Welfare Act (1993). The following are some functions of the Act as they pertain to NGOs and INGOs:

- Promote, facilitate, coordinate, monitor, supervise and evaluate NGO activities.
- Provide possible assistance for the establishment, promotion, extension and strengthening of NGO activities.
- Function as the coordinating body between HMG and NGOs.
- Advise and provide recommendations to the government in the formulation of plans, policies, and programs related to social welfare and the service sector.
- Establish trust or funds for social welfare activities and encourage others to do the same.
- Conduct training and undertake studies and research on social welfare issues.
- Conduct assessment of assets of NGOs in Nepal.
- Make an effort in protecting national and international assistance and use it judiciously.

Many observers are doubtful as to whether the present structure of SWC can handle these functions. It is important to keep in mind that SWC's efficiency and success, on the other hand, should not result in unnecessary control and impediments in the path of NGOs and INGOs in Nepal.

NGOs and the Environment in Nepal

Nepal is facing a deep crisis in governance. The seven-year old Maoist insurgency that began on February 13, 1996, has challenged the state's legitimate monopoly in force, taxation, loyalty of citizens and legitimacy and created a counter political space in the minds of the people and on the ground. Violent conflicts have claimed the lives of over 10,000 Nepalese by now. This situation has in many cases directly affected the operation of NGOs in Nepal. Therefore, the Ninth Annual Cologne Conference focused mainly on the operation of German NGOs in Nepal in the context of the ongoing political strife in Nepal. Expressing extreme sadness at the prevailing situation in Nepal, the NGO representatives participating in the conference unanimously adopted the following peace resolution:

"We, the representatives of the nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) active in Nepal, wish to express our deep concern over the fact that the negotiations

between the representatives of the Nepalese government and those of the Maoists have been disrupted. Therefore, we are addressing our appeal to the political parties in Nepal, to the Nepalese government and to the Maoist leaders to renew the ceasefire and re-start the negotiations in order to solve the political problems on a constitutional and democratic basis and thus create a long-lasting peace in the country. This is the prerequisite for progress and improvement of the life quality for the people in Nepal. Only in a peaceful environment will we be able to continue working as efficiently as possible for the sake of the Nepalese people.”

The plea of the representatives of NGOs should be taken in the context of their desire to have a peaceful and relatively safe environment to carry out their field work. The NGOs, small and limited in resources as they are, must rely upon the precautions taken and advice and alerts provided by the official donor agencies like GTZ or DIFID, which have established a risk management office in Nepal. A team of experts in the risk management office analyzes the prevailing situation and security issues in different parts of the country and provides security advice to various projects, alerting them to the level of danger and appropriate steps to be taken. Furthermore, NGOs are in need of assistance in crisis prevention and civil conflict management.

NGOs fear that the growing escalation and seeming intensification of the conflict could jeopardize their respective projects. Since, unlike development aid by the state, the NGO funding depends entirely on private donations for specific projects, the inability of donors to visit Nepal and especially the project site for security reasons could easily result in the loss of donations. As NGOs operate at the grassroots level, they could conceivably be instrumental toward realizing the high-priority national goal of alleviating mass poverty, which is commonly believed to be at the base of the ongoing conflict and violence.

In spite of heightened risks, uncertainties and logistic difficulties, the engagement of German NGOs in Nepal has not weakened. Particularly noteworthy is that the ongoing involvement of the German NGOs in Nepal has not been founded on a certain sense of obligation or potential financial or political/strategic gains; rather it has been founded on friendship between the peoples. Still, the German NGOs are much concerned about the unresolved conflict. They are looking for initiatives by the responsible parties - the government, political parties and the Maoists - toward restoration of peace and security in Nepal, which is a prerequisite for effective operation of NGOs and INGOs.

(Partly based on the outcome of the Ninth NGO Conference, held in Cologne in September 2003, jointly organised by the German-Nepal Friendship Association and the Friedrich Ebert Foundation)