

ENVIRONMENTAL ISSUES, POLICIES AND MEDIA REPORTING IN NEPAL

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INTRODUCTION

There is no one issue form where discussions about Nepal's environment and development problems can be started. Talking economics, the per capita GNP is about US \$ 160 which makes it one of the poorest countries in the world. On the environmental front too, the problems are no less severe. Deforestation is one of the major environmental problems facing Nepal. Over 75 per cent of the country's 18 million people depend on firewood as the main source of energy. Animal husbandry which is also a part of the lives of most of the Nepalis—more than 90 per cent of whom are dependent on agriculture to make a living—also adds to the pressure on the forests.

Deforestation, the most pressing environmental problem facing Nepal, is rooted in poverty. The lack of alternatives forces the people to go to the forests to meet their needs which in the longrun creates more problems that further intensify the impoverishment. There also seems to be no immediate escape from this vicious circle. Solving the economic problems will lead to further environmental damage (say if more people were to be settled on forest land) and leaving the economic problems alone is also not going to be of much help.

The conflict between government policies and practice has also take its toll in the country's environmental conservation efforts. Started with the initial blunder of the mid-1950s with the nationalisation of the forests, the government introduced community forestry in the 1970s but it has yet to develop a mechanism to hand over the forests completely to the villagers.

A part of the fragile, young and still forming mountains (10 mm per year), drenched by torrential rainfall (1600 mm to 4000 mm per year in some parts), inhabited by the most deprived population in the world (per capita S \$ 160) and with a high population growth rate (2.6 per cent per annum). Nepal can be said to be on the brink of an environmental disaster. Landslides and soil erosion, the two natural processes, are accelerated by human interventions and this had led to descreasing soil productivity, which is making it more difficult to meet the needs of the galloping population.

Modern "development: started in Nepal only in 1950. Following the political changes of 1950, Nepal opened her doors to the outside world. In the past four decades, the country has launched seven development plans most of which have invariably emphasised the development of agriculture roads, power supply, communications and other infrastructure. One of the most visible impacts of the "development", however, has been the depletion of natural resources. Farm productivity has declined and soil erosion continues unabated despite millions of dollars spent in the conservation efforts.

Environmental Issues

(a) *Soil Erosion*

The process of natural soil erosion in Nepal has been accelerated by man made factors. The seventh plan estimated that 53 per cent of the landslides were man made. The cultivated slopes generally are inclined at more than 30 degrees and added to this the lack of proper drainage and unscientific terracing causes soil erosion. The soil loss for Nepal is about ten tons/hectare per year. The sediments carried by rivers and streams from the hills are deposited in the Terai or the plains. This has caused river beds in the Terai to rise by 15 to 30 cm. annually.

This has led to frequent floods in the Terai which causes substantial loss of agricultural land and human lives. It is said that in the past 200 years the Koshi river, which originates in Nepal has shifted 140 km. westwards in Bihar in India, and has destroyed land which provided subsistence to 6.5 million people.

(b) *Forest Depletion*

Forests are Nepal's most important natural resource. Because of marked variations in the elevation different species of trees are found in Nepal. Forests are the main source of firewood, fodder, medicinal herbs, timber and raw materials for industries. The annual per capita consumption of firewood is 644 kgs for mountains and hill regions and 380 kgs for the Terai regions. This consumption is increasing in proportion to the size of the population.

In the last three decades there has been uncontrolled deforestation. The deforestation had been mainly due to care-less exploitation of the forests by the political interests. Most importantly the resettling of landless peasants prior to the elections in forest land has been one of the most severe problems. The depletion of this resources has put the pressure on other areas of the economy as well. The demand for labour for firewood and fodder collection has gone up and so has the demand for the products.

The dependency on the forests for energy (mainly firewood) and the lack of alternatives has also led the villagers to burn dung. This has led to having less fertilizer for the fields and decreased productivity. The gradual loss of forest area has also led to the gradual disappearance of the bio-diversity.

The density of livestock population in Nepal is one of the highest in the Asia. But a significant part of livestock is unproductive. The distribution of grassland and livestock population across the country is also uneven. The Terai region which contains 30 per cent of the livestock population accounts for less than 3 per cent of the total grasslands. The available grassland is also over-used.

(c) *Migration and Re-Settlement*

The movement of the population within the country particularly from the Hills to Terai is taking place at an alarming rate. The main cause of migration is the economic disparity between the two regions. Migration has not only led to the overcrowding of the urban areas but has also meant added pressure to the farmlands of the Terai. The reason leading to the movement of the masses can also be said to have resulted from

environmental problems like land degradation and the decline in the soil productivity.

(d) *Subsistence Agriculture*

The Nepalese farmers who have always applied animal manure in the fields as a source of plant nutrients now have less and less manure to put into the fields. The main reason for this is the decreasing availability of fodder, lack of grazing lands, and the substitution of firewood with cattle dung.

On the other hand, to supplement the nutrient deficiency problems of the soil, farmers are being encouraged to use more chemical fertilizers. This has led to increased dependency on external inputs and the use of chemicals has also led to a gradual poisoning of the soil and contamination of water sources.

Another most obvious and indirect effect of the adoption of modern agriculture is the increasing use of pesticides. Poor quality, misuse and improper use of pesticides have resulted in numerous problems on human health, water quality and soil pollution. Pesticides are also stored in inadequate warehouses, usually in the centre of highly populated urban areas.

Different studies have indicated that there are more than 100 species of mammals, 800 species of birds, 600 species of butterflies, numerous invertebrates, and over 5,000 species of flowering plants and trees and about 200 species of ferns in Nepal. There are over 35 types of vegetation in Nepal which range from tropical hardwood forests to sub-alpine birch forests.

Leakage of these stored pesticides in the surrounding areas is another threat to public health. There is also no disposal policy for expired pesticides. The usual practice of pesticide disposal is burying it in the soil. The ground water which is thus polluted results in direct health hazards for humans, livestock populations and even wild animals.

(e) *Tourism*

The number of tourists visiting Nepal has increased from a few thousands of the early 1960s to more than 280,000 today. In general, tourist arrivals in Nepal is increasing by more than 17 per cent each year. It is also the main source of hard currency for the country. The number of arrivals is planned to be taken to one million by the end of this decade.

The results are predictable. This will lead to more pressure on the resources, overcrowding, and pollution. An estimate holds that 4,000 hectares of forests are pulled down annually to provide for the tourists. Additionally, the problems of environmental sanitation are also being felt. More than 125 mountaineering groups that have attempted to scale Mount Everest after 1950, for example have left behind 50 tons of plastics, glass, metal, clothes, paper, unused medicines, food, tents, and even a helicopter scattered around the mountain.

(f) *Urbanisation*

Rapid urbanisation has also led to major problems of air, water, and sound pollution in cities, Kathmandu Valley, for example is choking. The bowl shaped valley—which

Kathmandu is—has been facing ever increasing smog in the winter months. Because there are no winds that sweep the valley clean most of the particles in the fog come back to the ground. The government's policy of allowing polluting industries in the valley, has added to the problem.

Unplanned expansion is another factor that adds to this problem. Public land development has been limited to a few schemes launched by government. And because of the lack of proper implementation of the urban-land use plans, most of the fertile agricultural land is being transformed into jungles of concrete. Similar problems are being faced in other cities especially those in the industrial districts of the Terai.

(g) *Industrialisation*

There are about 4,000 industries registered in Nepal. Out of these, the NPC/IUCN/NECG survey identified 175 industrial plants were significant sources of pollution. The report identified that a majority of the pollution prone plants were located in nine of the country's 75 districts. The study listed cement, leather and tanning, paper and pulp, soap and chemicals, and textile industries as the main polluters. Ironically these are the major industries of Nepal and most of them are located in urban areas.

Environmental Policies

Following the restoration of multi-party democracy and constitutional monarchy in the country, Nepal has taken a major leap forward in the area of environmental policy-making. I must be mentioned, however, that there were also very good-looking policies regarding environmental conservation in Nepal from the Sixth Plan onwards. It thus becomes clear that policies alone do not help and what is needed are programmes for the translation of the policies into action. Some of the recent policies on conservation are:

(a) *Constitutional Guarantees for Conservation*

The Constitution of the kingdom of Nepal 1990 includes some provisions for the conservation of environment and the protection of natural resources. The present constitution mentions environmental protection in the Directive Principles of State Policies and another mention is made under part 20 that concerns with ratification, accession, acceptance and approval of treaties. The Constitution also mandates the creation of an environment and natural resource conservation sub-committee in the House of Representatives.

(b) *The Eighth Plan*

The approach paper for the Eighth Plan, to be formulated, also prioritizes the environment. The seriousness of the situation of natural resources has been recognized both at policy and programme levels. The Sixth Plan was also very specific to identify the environmental issues. The Seventh Plan (1985-90) emphasises forest protection and the development of alternative fuel sources.

For the Eight Plan, the National Planning Commission aims to adopt an integrated approach to environmental policy with sustainability as the overall goal. It is also geared

towards intergrating human development with évironmental provisions.

(c) *The Ministry of Environment*

The recent creation of a Ministry of Forest and Environment by the government is also another sign which shows that environmental conservation has on the national agenda. The government has also announced that it will come up with specific policies regarding conservation issues soon.

Role of NGOs in Influencing Environmental Policies

The new freedom that have come to the country after the establishment of multi-party pluralism, many NGOs have undertaken different aimed to influence environment and development related policy making. The Nepal Forum of Environmental Journalists (NEFEJ), which I represent in this meeting, is one such organisation. Established in 1986 the forum has been engaged in conducting awareness raising programmes aimed to influence three basic target groups. They are:

- (a) Journalists
- (b) Policy makers and Politicians
- (c) The general public

(a) *Programmes for Journalists*

The programmes for journalists include training/workshops on environmental issues, investigative reporting fellowships, a best environment story award and publication of background papers as training follow-up material. The forum has also recently published a Nepali translation of a handbook for environmental journalists, which was originally published by the Asian Forum of Environmental Journalists and ESCAP.

(b) *Programmes Aimed at Influencing Public Policy*

For policy makers and politicians, the programmes include environmental orientation classes, discussions and interactive meetings. Among others, the forum had also organised a programme to brief the members of the constitution drafting committee constituted by his majesty the King, on the needs to include environmental conservation in the statute.

The forum has also organised programmes to urge different political parties to include their commitment to environmental protection in their election manifestos. The forum also publishes Information Updates-or briefing material-to brief parliamentarians in the house committee on environment and natural resources about the environmental issues pressing the country and their constituencies. The information packages also include briefing material on international conventions and meetings, like the forthcoming UNCED, for example. Besides this, consultation programmes between the MPs and environment experts are also organised programmes to train grass roots political workers on what they can do to protect the environment have also been started.

(c) Programmes Aimed to Create Awareness of the General Public

The forum's programmes targeted to reach the masses comprise of the publication of a bi-monthly wall newspaper and broadcasting a weekly radio programme that deal with environment and development issues. The wall newspaper has a print run of 10,000 copies and are distributed to all parts of the country through development agencies, local NGOs, primary and high schools and direct delivery.

The radio programme is aired every Friday on Radio Nepal the only radio station in the country. Television documentaries and studio-produced talk shows are also a part of the forum's drive to inform the public-especially the urban viewers who have access to the national television.

The Results

A major step in the field of environmental coverage in the Nepali press has been an overwhelming increase in the issues that are reported. The Forum's annual Media Coverage Survey, shows that not only is the environment in the news almost every week, but most of the stories are also given due prominence. Coverage of environmental issues on television is also increasing. In 1991 the Forum was requested to produce a documentary in collaboration with Nepal Television. Last year too the Forum coordinated the production of one talk show on rural development on television. A 1991 production of the Forum was also aired on the national network.

The recent increases in the media regarding providing coverage to environmental issues can be said to be a result of the training the Forum has provided to journalists all over Nepal. Also worth noting is that newspapers published from different districts have also started the publication of special environment supplements without anyone needing to tell them to do so.

Policy makers and parliamentarians in Nepal have also started showing considerable interest in the Forum's information programme. A most recent development has been a request letter received from the major opposition party in parliament seeking the Forum's support for briefing the party's MPs on environment and developmental issues. Regarding this, keeping to the Forum's policy to be equi-distant from all political interests and independence, work is under way to request all political parties to show their interest in having such briefing programmes. The programmes will be conducted this year. The inclusion of their commitment to environmental conservation by all political parties in their election manifestos is another sign that proves that influencing public policy is possible.

The impact of a consultation programme between parliamentarians (from the environment sub-committee) and environment and development experts has also been very encouraging. The parliamentarians had requested in writing many questions relating to environment and development, which shows that they are ready to hear expert opinion on the issues. The result of this interaction was the Forum's decision to publish the Information Updates for distribution to parliamentarians. Three issues of the Update have been published so far and will be continued in 1992 also.

The programmes aimed to influence the opinion of the general public have also been very rewarding. The wall newspaper has reached and is read all over the country. The radio programme also draws about 100 letters from the listeners every month.

Environmental Reporting in Nepal

Environmental issues, in themselves hardly make the story unless there are people affected by or related to the story. This type of reporting is not new to Nepal. More specialised writing, say on the issues like the depleting ozone layer, or the climate treaties or even challenging "biased" green reports published in the West as regards global warming, is new. This is so because, till some years ago it was very difficult to get access to the background material to prepare the stories.

The situation, however, is changing and it is changing at the desired pace i.e. not so fast. Desired pace, because the media are not yet filled up with stories on environment that originate in the West but have more local reports. This does not, however, mean that there is nothing that is coming from outside. It is there but is limited. And rightly so, because to the average Nepali, how to check deforestation and control landslides are of more immediate concern than rising seas and global warming. These local issues if tackled properly definitely help the global cause to check the warming of the planet.

The Forum's programmes have also helped to maintain the interest in environmental reporting or development communication in general. Among others, the granting of investigative reporting fellowships, and their publication has helped to encourage journalists to follow the issues and conduct in-dept analysis.

Problems

The main problem with environmental reporting in Nepal reflects the problem with journalism as a whole. The state of the development of the media, both in terms of production technology and also journalism itself, is something that will take many more years to change. At present there are more than 450 newspapers and periodicals registered in Nepal. Most of them, however, no more than just namesakes. Most of the publications are tabloids that do not abide by basic journalistic norms and ethics.

Environmental reporting, more than reporting political speeches or functions, has its own problems. Especially so, because in countries like Nepal, it is very difficult to get information, which at most of the times does not exist. Moreover, information in environmental issues, which is mainly scientific in nature is also difficult to understand. Understanding the statistics that are published in the "development industry" and government reports is another perennial problem.

These factors point to the need to train journalists, reporting on environment and development issues, in the basics of science and ecology as well as economics. Doing this will over the long run help to develop a cadre of writers who can understand the issues better. This means that they will also be able to explain the issues to the public better. Some efforts, to address the problems, has been made by the Handbook for Environmental Journalists, but there is still much to be done in this regard.

Before I conclude, I would like to thank the organisers of this workshop to have started work aimed at upgrading the skill of the journalists in the field of reporting and writing on environment and development issues, Back, home my organisation has also, in its own ways, started some work aimed at achieving the same objectives. So, it is time to give this modest start a big boost. In this regard, we at the NEFEJ, are always ready to take initiatives and participate in any joint effort aimed at insuring the health this planet.