



Contributions of Nongovernmental Organizations in Local Social Development in Nepal: A Narrative Inquiry

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Abstract

This paper, informed by social capital theory and a narrative approach, reports on a part of a study on the contributions of nongovernmental organizations to local social development in Nepal. The sampling frame consisted of 163 locally based NGOs implementing external donor-funded projects approved by the Social Welfare Council. The maximum variation sampling was employed to sample NGO executives for the semi-structured interviews (n=10). Likewise, local elected leaders (n=5) and government officials (n=3) were also interviewed. The findings reveal that NGOs' efforts have not adequately addressed the material conditions, social cohesion, inclusion, and empowerment of marginalized communities. Lack of needs-based programs, short-term focus, political and ethnic diversity, elite influence, and restrictive operating rules and cultures have hindered NGOs' contributions to local social development. The study contributes to the NGO literature by providing empirical insights into NGOs' successes and failures in social development, leveraging social capital in Nepal. The findings offer practical implications for government, policymakers, donors, and NGOs to enhance the effectiveness of NGO-initiated social development programs.

Keywords: Nongovernmental organizations, social development, NGOs' contributions, social capital, nepal

Introduction

The history of voluntary organizations dates back centuries, but

nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) emerged during the transition from colonial rule to self-governance in the

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mid-20th century (Fernando & Heston, 1997). The term NGO was first officially used in the 1945 United Nations Charter, and later, NGOs gradually became prominent actors in developing countries (Fernando & Heston, 1997). In the 1970s, traditional development strategies were perceived as ineffective in improving the living conditions of people in developing countries, leading international donors, governments, and policymakers to emphasize the roles of NGOs in development (Midgley, 2003). The NGO sector gained dominance in the 1990s as donor agencies started channelling their development aid through NGOs in countries like Nepal (El-Gack, 2016).

In Nepal, NGOs are defined as private, nonprofit, and politically neutral organizations implementing programs for the people's welfare (National Planning Commission [NPC], 1992). Historically, voluntary organizations in Nepal pursued social welfare and development goals through welfare-oriented traditional approaches (Neupane, 2002). However, the growth of contemporary NGOs is a more recent development (Rijal, 2004). The constitution of 1990 and the democratic political system, the establishment of the Social Welfare Council (SWC) in 1992, and policy reforms at the beginning of the 1990s contributed to the growth and institutional development of NGOs across various sectors of national development (NPC, 1997). As of June 15, 2021, 51,513 NGOs and 230 INGOs were affiliated with the SWC (SWC, 2021). Similarly, the SWC approves over 1,100 foreign-funded projects of 700 NGOs annually (SWC, 2022), indicating that the NGO sector has become a crucial player in national development efforts

(Neupane, 2002).

Since the mid-1990s, the government of Nepal (GoN) has adopted policies prioritizing NGOs as alternatives and development partners for social welfare and local development (NPC, 1997, 2016), simplifying NGO registration and administrative procedures, and allowing operational autonomy and self-promotion to support local development (NPC, 1997). The fourteenth plan (2016-2019) aimed to improve living standards by mobilizing NGOs in areas where government presence was weak (NPC, 2016). The government also has a national policy of mobilizing foreign aid through NGOs to promote public welfare (Ministry of Finance, 2019). Article 15 of the Local Government Operation Act [LGOA] (2017) has entrusted municipalities to coordinate and mobilize NGOs to support local development (Ministry of Law, 2017). It suggested that the NGO sector has become essential to the social development landscape at the local level. With the steady increase in the number of NGOs, a fundamental question is how to measure their contributions. Scholars have suggested that NGOs' contributions rely on their operational areas and should be measured differently (Hartmann et al., 2019). In this regard, this study set out to explore the contributions of development NGOs working to promote the social welfare of the communities based on the framework of Bhatt (1995).

This study draws on social capital theory, as it is closely linked to the social dimensions of development (Christoforou, 2017) and has significantly impacted contemporary development thinking and approaches (Woolcock & Narayan, 2000). Significantly, NGOs

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leverage social capital to facilitate local development efforts (Mondal, 2000). Social capital provides valuable insights into how individuals and communities leverage resources through social networks, shared values and identities, reciprocal norms, and participatory decision-making to enhance their collective well-being (Christoforou, 2017). It facilitates interactions, relationships, social trust, and collective action and strengthens connections with other organizations at the community level (Chou, 2006).

Social capital theory suggests that a community's ability to address common problems relies on the presence or absence of social capital within that community (Keele, 2005). Since NGOs' contributions to local social development are a micro-level social phenomenon, this study examines how effectively NGO programs support development through the lens of micro-level social capital (Ahn & Ostrom, 2008; Ostrom & Ahn, 2009; Johnson, 2016). Social capital and its insights align with the components of the Social Quality Model. The SQM assumes that people, as social beings, interact with each other and have diverse collective identities that enable them to achieve their self-realization (Beck et al., 2012). This study adopted SQM proposed by Abbott and Wallace (2012) and Abbott et al. (2016) as a welfare approach to development consisting of four components: economic security, social cohesion, social inclusion, and social empowerment. Economic security encompasses material conditions, and social cohesion facilitates cooperation, enabling people to work together toward common goals. Social inclusion stresses individuals' engagement with social organizations and access to social support

networks (Abbott et al., 2016), and social empowerment enhances people's capabilities to manage their daily lives and take advantage of opportunities to promote personal development (Abbott et al., 2016).

In Nepal, NGOs registered and affiliated with the SWC have been entrusted with promoting social welfare activities (Ministry of Law, 1992a), providing welfare services at the local level as directed by the government. Therefore, the SQM offered a comprehensive framework for understanding the multidimensional aspects of individual and community welfare.

Several studies have illustrated that NGOs have positive and negative aspects in their efforts to facilitate social development at the local level. One strand of extant research has shown that NGOs have the potential to generate "self-help solutions" to many issues within society (Makoba, 2002, p. 60). They can play crucial roles in improving the quality of life of the people (Bierschenk & Hoffmann, 2006, as cited in Jacobs et al., 2017) and are capable of reaching the target groups (Stirrat & Henkel, 1997). Moreover, they can serve as appropriate means for overcoming diverse forms of social exclusion (El-Gack, 2016).

Other strand of previous empirical studies has demonstrated several shortcomings of NGOs. Notably, NGOs might promote corporate culture (Haque, 2011), concentrate on urban and market areas, and lack tangible programs and regular sources of funding (El-Gack, 2016; Haque, 2011). They may fail to obtain social acceptance and positive impressions from the community (Islam & Morgan, 2012) and cultivate elitist social processes and represent

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the interests of dominant social classes, instead of vulnerable groups (Fernando & Heston, 1997). Moreover, they may fail to localize development and provide space for beneficiaries in development process (Islam, 2014), and may not implement programs based on local contexts (Islam, 2017).

From the theoretical perspective, Islam and Morgan (2012) explored NGOs' contributions to social capital formation and community empowerment in Bangladesh. However, extant empirical studies mostly failed to explore how NGOs perform in the communities and what their problems are while implementing their programs based on the social capital theory in developing countries like Nepal. This study aimed to fill this knowledge gap in the literature of NGOs by answering the following two questions:

1. How far do NGOs contribute to local social development in Nepal?
2. What factors affect NGOs' program implementation in the communities?

Methodology

Research Context and Selection of NGOs

Based on the availability of rich data (Neuman, 2014) and the research questions designed to understand social phenomena (Brannen & O'Connell, 2015) and analyzing the list of donor-funded NGOs working across the country, the study was conducted in those municipalities where NGOs were concentrated. A list of 163 locally-based NGOs (registered and operating outside the Kathmandu Valley) was prepared based on a list of 699 external donor-funded NGOs working in five

thematic areas (education and literacy; health and sanitation; women, children, and disabilities; poverty reduction and livelihoods; capacity development and empowerment), obtaining project approval from the SWC in the fiscal year 2020/021. The principle of maximum variation (Patton, 2015) was adopted to sample NGOs and their executives (n=10) to capture diversity within the heterogeneous population (Patton, 2015).

A Narrative Inquiry

A narrative inquiry is a robust methodology that allows researchers to delve into the rich and multifaceted nature of human experiences through the stories people share (Barkhuizen et al., 2014). By engaging in collaborative interactions with participants, researchers can explore the complex, subjective, and contextual nature of human experiences (Ylijoki, 2001). This approach recognizes no single, universal, and objective reality. Instead, it holds that lived experiences shared by participants constitute valuable knowledge that can be applied in real situations (Mertova & Webster, 2020). The narrative inquiry framework provided deep and nuanced insights into the lived experiences and perspectives of participants from NGOs and the government, allowing for an intensive understanding of the contributions and the influencing factors.

Data Collection and Analysis

The study employed semi-structured interviews to collect comprehensive qualitative data. Interviews were conducted with the 10 NGO executives from April 2021 to December 2021 (average 75 minutes). Similarly, five local elected leaders (average

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45 minutes) and 3 local government officials (average 75 minutes) were also interviewed from February 2022 to April 2022 to substantiate the information from the NGOs. The elected leaders and government officials were sampled from the same district as the NGO executives were sampled. The respondents' validation and triangulation approaches (Brown & Hale, 2014) were adopted to ensure the trustworthiness of the data. The respondents were assigned codes NE1-NE10 for NGO executives, PL1-PL5 for elected leaders, and GO1-GO3 for government officials to maintain anonymity.

The thematic analysis of qualitative data was performed through qualitative data analysis NVivo 12 Pro software based on Braun and Clarke's (2006) framework using the coding-category-theme model while analyzing and interpreting the data. The audio-recorded data was transcribed verbatim; thematic analysis was data-driven based on their explicit meaning (Braun & Clarke (2006). A codebook was also prepared to systematically organize the codes, categories, and themes.

Findings and Discussion

NGOs' Contributions to Local Social Development

The analysis of information from the respondents on NGOs' contributions to local social development generated six themes: need assessment, approach to development, participation of target groups, community awareness and empowerment, social relationships and trust, and collective action.

Need Assessment

NGOs need to prepare need-based programs to address the interests of target

groups. The NGO executives (hereafter executives) were asked whether they conducted a need assessment to identify the community's needs. One executive replied, "We are familiar with the needs and situation of the community as we have been working for more than two and half decades" (NE 18). However, another executive stated, "We identify community needs first, and if our programs do not align with their interests, our programs may not succeed" (NE 14). Similarly, another executive added, "We adopt need-based programs to address the expectations of the target groups. If we design our programs in hotels and offices without a feasibility study, target groups may not accept them" (NE8). The views of executives NE10, NE9, and NE8 indicated that NGOs may design their programs without conducting need assessments.

The local elected leaders were asked whether NGOs in their jurisdictions adopt need-based programs. Two leaders stated that only a few NGOs visit communities, consult target groups, and understand the situation of the communities before implementing their programs (PL3 & PL5). However, the other two elected leaders shared that mainly Kathmandu Valley-based NGOs with links with central government authorities often prepare their programs in their offices (PL2 & PL4). Another elected leader added: They use Google Maps to search for their target communities and conduct agreements with their donors" (PL3). The elected leaders viewed that only genuine (mission-driven and community-oriented) NGOs conduct need assessments to address the needs of target groups.

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Approach to development

The executives were asked whether they adopted development strategies to fulfill immediate needs or sought long-term benefits for their beneficiaries. In response, they argued that their beneficiaries expected immediate needs. Two executives shared that their beneficiaries are from marginalized communities, and they implement those programs that fulfill their immediate needs and support their daily lives (NE6 & NE7). Another executive clarified the Nepalese scenario: “Although NGOs might have long-term projects based on long-term strategic plans, community members mainly expect immediate needs, and NGO projects support their short-term needs” (NE6). More precisely, an executive viewed that when they worked in the ultra-poor communities, livelihoods appeared as their priority, NGOs needed to work for them. He said, “When we talk about education, the marginalized groups often say ‘We have concerns of our children, but we cannot manage clothes, shoes, fees, and books for them. If they do not work, we cannot manage our daily lives’” (NE5). Notably, another executive shared a unique experience as quoted:

When we asked the ultra-poor households to engage in agriculture, they hesitated to accept our proposal. When requested, they did not receive nanny goats to support their animal husbandry. If they unwillingly accept nanny goats, they may not care for them anymore and dispose of them. (NE7)

The quote illustrates that poor households prefer immediate needs from NGO programs, and their needs differ from those of middle-class families. When asking NGOs’ approach to development

with the respondents from the government, elected leaders also agreed and stated that “ultra-poor communities and households suffering from hand-to-mouth problems and mostly depending on daily wages want immediate benefits and may not have long-term interests” (PL4). Another government official asserted that “a few NGOs have the long-term vision, mission, and objectives to work for a long time and perform durable work in the community” (GO2). The quotes from the respondents from the NGOs and government illustrated that NGOs mainly implement short-term projects to provide immediate benefits to the community.

Participation of target groups

Executives illustrated several strategies they adopted to ensure target groups’ participation in their programs to provide them with benefits like participatory rural appraisal (PRA) and rapid rural appraisal (RRA) (NE5), Vein diagram, and mobility mapping methods (NE2), and fusibility study and community surveys (NE9). However, when asked whether the benefits of donor-funded projects reached the target beneficiaries and supported their living conditions, they revealed that: “a few local elites tend to manipulate and influence to get benefits” (NE8), “a few elites within marginalized groups often create obstacles to providing benefits to target groups” (NE7), and “the vulnerable groups have little chance to access and obtain benefits from NGOs “ (NE10). The quotes pointed out the possibility of elite capture and intended groups to obtain benefits from NGO programs. Most notably, another executive stated:

Our programs provide extra benefits to those community members who

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can hardly maintain their daily lives and meet their needs for 8 to 10 months from their income because they have fewer animals and land. Our programs may not benefit the landless households who depend on daily wages. (NE7)

The quote suggested that NGO programs did not benefit poor households; middle-class families often participated and benefitted from NGOs. Similar to executives' views, an elected leader further added that working in remote areas and bringing poor households into the mainstream is challenging because, in marginalized communities, "a few elites tend to manipulate and influence NGOs to their programs and convince community members in favor of them" (PL4). It was revealed that NGOs implement programs targeting marginalized groups, and the target groups lagged in obtaining benefits from them.

Community awareness and empowerment

Once the issue of community awareness was discussed with the executives, they asserted that although the level of awareness has increased in recent years, most vulnerable groups were unaware of their living conditions, saying, "traditional thinking and status quo still dominate the thinking of the vulnerable communities and how they can be free from them" (NE4), they are poor and cannot do anything" (NE5), and "they may say everything is good and no problem to them, if we ask them even though they are suffering from hand to mouth problems" (NE9). Further, an executive shared that while working in several districts in the southern municipalities, he observed that "a few elites dominate

the whole community, and new ideas are limited to a few dominant elites and are circulated within their limited circle" (NE1). The executives meant that despite the increase in awareness, marginalized communities were not aware of community circumstances and their living conditions due to the domination of a few elites.

While considering the participation and leadership of members of marginalized groups in NGO programs as critical to their empowerment, executives were asked who actively participated in and led their programs. Two executives argued that when we consult with vulnerable groups, a few elites are active and influential and consult with us to manipulate the existing situation and create obstacles, influencing other vulnerable groups and NGOs through several strategies (NE2 & NE5). Meanwhile, another executive asserted that "the marginalized groups could not lead NGO programs and one level higher than target groups and middle-class families lead NGO projects" (NE7). The executives viewed that a few elites within the target groups influenced NGOs, and the target groups had few opportunities to lead NGO programs.

Executives were also asked about the underlying causes of elites' influence on NGOs. Two executives replied that marginalized groups hold that people with power and higher status should play active roles in the community" (NE2), "a few elites seek credibility from NGO programs. The political elites may have political interests" (NE7). The quotes indicated a high possibility of elite capture in leading NGO programs, which would impede NGOs' efforts to develop marginalized groups' capacity

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by providing leadership roles in their programs.

Social relationships and network

Since mutual relationships, networking, and trust are vital for NGOs, executives were first asked how they promote social relationships and networking among community members. Although since 1990, virtually all NGOs have worked through community groups, their group approach could not succeed in strengthening their mutual relationships, sharing that “community groups could not make progress because once NGOs complete their projects, members often leave their groups” (NE6), and “they join in the group works initially, but tend to emphasize their interest, and then the group works become weak” (NE10). Another executive emphasized why individuals became passive in group work, as quoted:

I worked in the highly emphasized government and donor-funded Poverty Reduction Fund program, introduced in 2003 and implemented for several years by forming community groups. Unfortunately, the program could not produce the expected results because community members became passive in group work. (NE7)

The executives NE6, NE7, and NE10 thought that community groups were functional until their projects were operational and when group members perceived any personal benefits, impeding their social relationships, networking, and benefits from group work.

The executives pointed to several factors impeding their willingness to promote social relationships and networking, mainly “a large number of members in a group and the lack of economic

incentives to remain in groups (NE6), “lack of understanding and priority for personal benefits” (NE7), “inclusion of members of several social groups in a single group” (NE8), and “historical factors and previous relationship among community members” (NE9). The quotes demonstrated that community members join social relationships if they perceive individual incentives and several socio-cultural factors impede their social relationships.

While discussing the issue of NGOs’ group approach, elected leaders shared that “I worked in an NGO working in gender violence and livelihoods through cooperatives. However, the group approach in livelihood succeeded, but it failed in gender violence” (PL3). Another executive remarked “If community members perceive additional benefits of work, they prefer to work in groups, and if they perceive that individuals obtain benefits, they may not prefer to work in groups” (PL4). These two quotes stress that group work depends on group members’ perceptions and preferences, particularly their expected benefits.

While asking about the social relationships among community members, the executives noted that the community consisted of several castes, languages, cultures, and ethnic groups, and the community was more fragmented, impeding their relationships with other groups. An executive shared that “when there are several, so-called upper and lower caste, majority, and minorities within the community, lower caste groups may think that upper caste groups do not recognize them, hold negative attitudes, and create obstacles for them” (NE2). The quote portrayed that homogeneous and heterogeneous communities have distinct attributes, impacting building trust among community groups.

Similarly, two executives noted that: “a

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few community members tend to distort community members' thinking to create a threat and fear and a negative attitude towards community works" (NE10) and "not ethnic and upper-class households consider NGO programs are designed for ethnic minorities and create obstacles for ethnic groups" (NE7). Citing the situation of southern communities of the country, another executive stated that "the so-called lower caste and marginalized groups consist of several castes and have several identities. They often do not touch each other, work together, and hold different interests" (NE5). The executives observed that a few local elites and upper classes were responsible for creating misunderstandings among the community in homogeneous communities.

Collective action

Once the researcher explored executives' perceptions on whether community members viewed community problems as common problems, the executives opined that they "do not have inherent feelings about others' interests" (NE9) "rarely think beyond relatives, supporters, and families" (NE4), and "individuals with economically higher status are selfish, and tend to manipulate the situation in favor of them" (NE2). The three executives thought that community members had little concern over others and tended to hold opportunistic behaviors. Similarly, two executives asserted that most community members, particularly local elites tend to improve their lives as they are only eligible for benefits. If NGO programs do not directly benefit them, they do not assist NGOs" (NE3 & NE10). The quotes demonstrated that opportunistic behaviors were rampant within the community, and local elites, in particular, tended to obtain more benefits at the cost of the marginalized groups. In addition, another executive shared an experience:

A few years ago, we visited a

community to identify the needs of a marginalized Dalit community and identified a household whose head was disabled and did not have a hand pump for drinking water and flushing a toilet. However, once we began constructing the facilities for that household, community members tried to influence us, and we faced several difficulties. (NE8)

This case illustrated how a few elites and upper classes in the community displayed opportunistic behaviors and influenced NGOs to preserve their interests and dominant roles, leading vulnerable groups to remain in poor conditions.

In addition, local government authorities had mixed views on NGOs' contributions. One government official argued that "something is better than nothing" while acknowledging that they were not fully satisfied with the NGOs' outputs relative to their resource mobilization, with a few exceptions (GO1). Another official noted that a few NGOs had performed better, but now only one worked effectively on women's empowerment, children's education, and social awareness (GO2).

Elected leaders provided several nuanced perspectives. One stated that "previously, an NGO successfully implemented income-generating livelihood programs without requiring any contribution from the municipality" (PL1). Two leaders observed that a few donor-funded NGOs collaborating with the local government have contributed significantly to healthcare, education, infrastructure, and agriculture (PL2 & PL4). However, the leaders criticized NGOs that were merely fronts for politicians and those focused on physical infrastructure, which often failed to contribute significantly (GO3).

The elected officials further complained that some NGOs invested significant resources but "phased out their projects before obtaining outputs" (PL3) and, in many cases, "did not consult

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with beneficiaries, impeding their participation and ownership” (PL4). These quotes highlighted that while genuine NGO efforts could yield positive impacts, poor planning, lack of expertise, and insufficient community engagement often resulted in subpar contributions.

Factors Affecting NGOs’ Program Implementation

The factors affecting successful program implementation by NGOs were discussed with executives. The analysis of their responses revealed four critical factors associated with four key determinants of collective action problems: political diversity, elite influence, ethnic diversity, and operating rules and cultures.

Political diversity: The executives viewed local politics and community members’ political interests as being reflected in NGO programs. They shared several instances like the “formation of groups in the community to mobilize community members” (NE5), “community members’ attitude towards community work” (NE3), and “community members’ thinking and behaviors” (NE10). Another executive added, “If the community is homogeneous in political interests, community members have similar views and collaborative culture and work together for mutual benefits. NGOs face obstacles in dealing with diverse political interests in a heterogeneous community” (NE3). The quotes demonstrated that local politics and community members’ political interests influence community members’ interest in engaging in collective action.

Elites influence: The executives argued that only a few elites might hold positive attitudes, utilize their expertise, and encourage community members to work collectively. However, in most cases,

elites often create problems by lobbying for their benefit. For example, two executives commented that the widely used term “elite capture” is not baseless because elites in society have power and tend to manipulate NGOs to promote their interests and control everything in society. As a result, their opinions guide other community members (NE3 & NE8). The executives explained that elites in the communities wielded significant influence and often used their power to guide the opinions and actions of vulnerable groups.

The following life experience of an executive demonstrates how local elites inhibit NGOs and their collaborative works quoted:

I used to work in the Rolpa district under the Western Upper Hill Poverty Reduction Project. A few local elites with high economic status created several obstacles and threats, and our staff could not go to the community. We were compelled to postpone our project for about six months. Finally, a group from the district headquarters and I went to the community, but we could not convince them. We were compelled to incorporate such households into our programs. (NE7)

The executives explained how powerful elites in the community dominated and manipulated NGO programs to serve their interests. One executive stated, “Local elites criticize NGO programs among donors and community members to farm rumors if they do not obtain benefits” (NL10). These quotes illustrate the strategies used by elites to influence and undermine NGO operations, creating complexities and challenges in mobilizing their development initiatives within the communities.

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Government authorities acknowledged the pervasive issue of “elite capture” within the communities, noting that most NGOs struggle to implement their programs effectively. One elected leader stated, “Elite capture is natural and rampant in the community. Most NGOs mobilize centrally recruited staff unfamiliar with the local context and identify the influence of elites, resulting in difficulties in implementing their programs” (PL3). Another leader further argued that “local elites and elites within target groups are more influential and tend to modify NGOs’ criteria to favor them. NGOs may be vulnerable to resisting them and their interests” (PL4). These quotes highlighted the challenges centrally-based NGOs face in dealing with the influential local elites manipulating program implementation to serve their interests.

Ethnic diversity: According to the executives, ethnic differences deeply rooted within the community posed challenges for NGO operations. They shared several examples: “NGOs face difficulties in mobilizing community members with distinctive languages, ethnicities, and religious beliefs for their mutual benefits” (NE8) and “conflict and dispute among community members create problems for our staff in the field” (NE9). The “so-called upper and lower caste groups often do not touch and live with each other, and work together” (NE5). Additionally, “if community members are from ethnic groups, so-called lower castes, other members often hesitate to accept their leadership” (NE2). The quotes illustrate how ethnic divisions and caste-based discrimination impeded NGOs’ program implementation.

Operating rules and culture: The executives observed that informal rules and traditional norms were far more influential within the community than formal government laws. They noted

that “formal government laws may not be operational and effective; instead, informal rules regulate the community members” (NE4). Additionally, “operating rules and traditional norms are more influential than local politics and their political interests that primarily guide community members and their behaviors” (NE3). The executives also highlighted the community’s perception that “if they work in groups and engage in collective efforts, they may not obtain benefits individually. Rather, the groups obtain benefits” (NE7). The quotes underscored how the dominance of informal cultures and traditional beliefs within the community negatively impacted the NGO’s ability to implement their programs effectively.

The executives highlighted how informal rules and cultural norms within the community, directly and indirectly, impacted NGO programs. They noted that “when NGOs work for women empowerment, and their participation; rights and privileges of marginalized groups, a conflict certainly emerges between their established practices and recent ideas” (NE2). Further, “women and girls often hesitate to participate in NGO programs, and they may face difficulties convincing them in their collaborative community works” (NE5). These quotes illustrate how community members’ ingrained beliefs and established practices clashed with the goals of NGO initiatives, hindering target groups’ participation and engagement.

Discussion

This study explored NGOs’ contributions to local social development and factors influencing their program implementation. This section discusses findings based on a thematic analysis of data to answer research questions.

First, most NGOs did not consult with target communities to identify needs

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before designing their programs, even if they were aware of designing need-based programs. Instead, a few centrally based NGOs connected to the central government authorities without field offices prepared their programs at their offices. The findings contradicted the assumptions that NGOs represent marginalized groups' interests in addressing community needs (Hiruy & Eversole, 2015). They did not support the idea that NGOs serve the poor for their self-reliant development (Nikkhah & Redzuan, 2010). NGOs may fail to adopt need-based programs when donors design programs without community consultation and NGOs do not work genuinely.

Second, community members were primarily concerned with immediate livelihood programs. Thus, despite NGOs' long-term visions, their programs were often designed to address their short-term issues and align with donor preferences. The findings suggested that NGO beneficiaries were interested in immediate benefits due to poverty in Nepal. However, scholars argue that addressing only immediate needs can impede the long-term welfare of marginalized groups (Abom, 2004). Similarly, NGOs' donor-driven approaches reduce community participation (Panda, 2007), indicating that short-term approaches do not support long-term national development efforts.

Third, despite their efforts, NGOs faced challenges in ensuring marginalized groups' participation, leadership, and benefits due to elite influence, poor living conditions of target groups, and NGOs' concentration in market areas, which impeded efforts to integrate marginalized communities

into mainstream development. The study found that marginalized groups lagged in obtaining benefits from NGO programs. It indicated that NGOs could not successfully align their programs with the bottom-up approach to social development and promote local initiatives to take advantage of development (Nikkhah & Redzuan, 2010); instead, social capital resulted in social exclusion in communities (Abom, 2004), impeding the government's policy to promote target groups's ownership in the local development process through NGOs (NPC, 1997). The findings do not align with a study by Islam (2017) that showed that NGOs successfully brought marginalized groups into mainstream development in Bangladesh.

Fourth, traditional thinking, the status quo, and influential elites dominated marginalized communities, hindering them from understanding their circumstances and leading NGO programs. Thus, NGOs' efforts could not ensure their leadership roles as expected; instead, a few elites with access to social networks were more active in leading NGO programs. This indicated that powerful elites with significant social capital advanced their interests, and unequal income, resources, and power dynamics prevented marginalized groups from being empowered by social networks (Islam & Morgan, 2012).

Fifth, NGOs typically worked in groups and encouraged marginalized groups to work in groups. However, community groups were interested in working individually, and group work was found to be weak. The individual economic incentive was the primary motivation to remain in groups and participate in community work. This

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finding suggested that NGOs could not foster social networks and relationships among community members, indicating the failure of social networks to facilitate cooperation among community members for mutual benefit (Johnson, 2016).

Sixth, despite forming community groups of similar status, consulting local leaders, and maintaining political neutrality, NGOs encountered collective action problems and opportunistic behaviors within communities in providing benefits to target groups. It demonstrated that NGOs aimed to promote friendship, cooperation, reciprocity, and social networks among groups (Johnson, 2016). However, their efforts partially failed to build trust and solidarity across heterogeneous groups due to entrenched social divisions (Andriani & Christoforou, 2016).

The study identified four key determinants that affect the implementation of NGO programs: political diversity, influence of local elites, ethnic diversity, and informal rules and cultures.

First, political dynamics and distinct political orientations within communities reflected and affected community members' collaborative culture and collective efforts for mutual benefits from NGO programs. Local political elites also distorted marginalized groups' thinking and behaviors, hindering NGOs from mobilizing target groups in their programs. The findings revealed that the clientelistic ties between politics and NGOs undermined community members' institutional and interpersonal trust, participation, and relationships (Andriani & Christoforou, 2016). The influential roles of local political elites may lead to political disputes, mistrust, hierarchies, and inequalities within the

community (Christoforou, 2017).

Second, in most instances, local elites failed to perceive community problems as shared issues and lacked empathy for vulnerable groups. They exhibited selfish behavior and hesitated to support NGOs unless they could obtain personal benefits and preserve dominant roles. The findings align with critiques that NGOs represent the interests of local elites rather than the broader community (Ulvila & Hossain, 2002). Drawing on social capital theory (Häuberer, 2011), the finding suggests that dominant elites restrict marginalized groups, limiting their ability to benefit from NGO programs.

Third, ethnic differences were deeply embedded, leading to discrimination and conflict among groups within the communities. It hindered collective action in heterogeneous communities and challenged NGOs to form and mobilize target populations for their programs. The findings showed that community members' deeply ingrained informal norms, values, and traditions undermined their ability to cooperate effectively (Fukuyama, 1997), which ultimately hindered community empowerment, requiring community members' shared interests and collective efforts, impacting people's daily lives (Laverack, 2006b).

Finally, traditional community cultures and informal norms shaped community members' attitudes and behaviors toward NGOs, posing challenges for NGOs in securing their participation and support. Similarly, conflicts between established practices and modern ideas created difficulties for NGOs to work with marginalized groups and facilitate their collective engagement in their programs.

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The findings revealed how informal rules and regulations devised by individuals and communities shaped their authority structures, behaviors, and activities (Ostrom & Ahn, 2009). As a result, community members' trust, norms, and attitudes toward NGO programs were heavily influenced by the prevailing informal operating rules, posing challenges for NGOs in mobilizing target groups for their programs. In essence, the root causes of the perceived obstacles facing NGOs stemmed from the interests and preferences of a few influential individuals (Boix & Posner, 1998), which often took precedence over the majority's needs. Further, self-interested behaviors (Ahn & Ostrom, 2008; Ostrom & Ahn, 2009) and a tendency to maximize personal gain created significant obstacles for NGOs seeking to implement their programs successfully.

Conclusion

The findings demonstrate that only a few genuine NGOs adopt need-based programs and often struggle to ensure target groups' participation and leadership roles in development. NGOs' short-term, donor-driven programs cannot meaningfully improve marginalized groups' long-term living conditions, and local elites and middle-class families primarily benefit from these programs. NGOs' group approaches partially fail to foster mutual relationships and effectively engage marginalized communities in their programs, hindering social cohesion and networking. The opportunistic behaviors of local elites undermine collective efforts in community work.

While some NGO executives exaggerated

their contributions as they tend to secure resources from their donors (Banks et al., 2015), the study concludes that except for a few genuine NGOs, NGOs only partially contribute to the material conditions, social cohesion, inclusion, and empowerment of marginalized groups (Abbott et al., 2016). Thus, their contributions to local social development cannot be considered satisfactory.

The findings also highlight the close connection between the NGO sector and local politics. If NGO practitioners fail to maintain political relationships, they often face difficulties navigating the community's diverse political interests. Further, ethnic differences are reflected in NGOs' operations, which can undermine collaborative community efforts. The prevailing social evils, including established practices, informal rules, the caste system, untouchability, and traditional cultures, have a detrimental impact on NGOs' work.

The findings have significant implications for the theory and practice of NGO-led social development. They contribute to the empirical understanding of how NGOs create and leverage social capital within communities to facilitate development. They have practical implications for policymakers and other stakeholders, providing a framework for enhancing NGOs' contributions to development. While the study incorporated relatively small sample sizes from government and NGO field staff and did not utilize social capital assessment tools to explore the actual impact of NGOs in the community, it can still serve as an analytical framework for future research.

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