

Preliminary Fieldwork Narrative Report

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Riding at the back of my friend's motorcycle along the curvy road from the Kathmandu valley towards the surrounding hills, I noticed how smooth the trip was. The good condition of the road did not match my memory of merely a year or two ago, when the same trip would have incurred multiple stopping due to its narrowness and bad conditions, especially during the monsoon season when wheels of vehicles frequently got stuck in the mud. Those journeys were certainly not as pleasant as this one.

I was on my way to Pharping, a community I have been familiar with and planning to work with for my research on community development. The good road was not uninterrupted. In the middle of the journey, bad road again prevailed for some distances. Still the overall journey had been cut down to 40-50 minutes while it would have taken 60-90 in the past. It came to my mind that even within the period of a year or two, mobility along the road has increased due to better road conditions, and it is easy to imagine that such mobility will continue to escalate into the future.



Image 1: the road to Pharping

I arrived in the familiar setting and greeted the manager of the Shikharapur Community Learning Center and the principal of the Shikharapur Community School, Niroj Shrestha, my host as well as main informant during this preliminary visit. Calling this a preliminary visit might be a little misleading. I have been to the community for various activities during my stay here as a UNESCO consultant during 2014-2017. But it was indeed my first visit out of that capacity.

I greeted Niroj warmly. I had an admiration towards him and his team. From what I had gathered in the past 2 years, he and his team are genuine community organizers who initiated their own community development work with resources contributed locally, with only occasional help from external donors. He agreed to host my visit promptly and quickly brainstormed with the village respectable elder, Shashi Aryal for the range of possible activities we could conduct during my visit. I sincerely wanted to make this a mutually beneficial trip for both of us and have therefore requested him to use me as much as he thinks suitable during the two-month period.

The first task I received is to have a sharing session with the bachelor degree students in the Shikharapur community campus. One of the very first questions I have in mind about the community is what they understand as development. And I took the opportunity to exactly do that with the students. By asking them what they consider to be most important in their lives, we started a reflective and engaging discussion on what could be development.



Image 2: My Sharing Session with Students of the Shikharapur Campus

I subsequently extended my conversations with farmers, women cooperatives, religious charity group, youth groups and community forest groups. I suspect they would have different, or even sometimes contradicting perspectives. One of the several important themes which emerge, is that development is about gaining access. "To me, development means convenience." Suneeta, a teacher in the community campus, gave me an uninvited answer, after accompanying me to several interviews. I found this comment, though sounds ordinary at the time, to be indeed quite significant. This comment is echoed by similar ones, such as "development is the ability to get whatever we want, be it healthcare, school or any other things" mentioned another young lady, Subita, who is one of the managers of an orphanage by a group of local youth. Others talk about the access for jobs, medicine and products deemed necessary for a better life. For farmers, this would involve seeds and fertilizers.

The notion of 'gaining access' refers to things previously not available. This is congruent with the changes in the community in the past few decades as observed by several elderly women. For instance, the current tea-drinking habit (a typical Nepali will drink tea for 4-6 times in a day) did not exist merely 20-30 years ago, because tea was not produced locally and thus not as widely available. The theme of convenience was brought out by the comment of an elder lady that "*kurta* (imported from India) is more easy to wash though I like *sari* (traditional costume) better' while explaining her change of dressing style. When discussing about festivals and the labor involved, they mentioned that the labor involved has drastically reduced due to the availability of festival items in the market. Another farmer commented "my wife would rather sell our wheat and buy wheat flour, than to process it herself".

Such gaining of access and convenience, unsurprisingly, comes in the expense of losing one's own production system and knowledge. The elderly women I talked to were nostalgic and expressed their preference on life in the past, particularly in terms of diet and human behaviour. "In the past, we used to eat so many different kinds of food, we ate little but we were strong. People nowadays eat a lot but are not strong" -- this statement refers to the variety of food in subsistence economy, and their health benefits. One of the major recent changes is the increased availability of food products in the market (facilitated by infrastructure development such as road), and their substitution of local products. "We used to like corn and mul (a milk product), now people only eat "chau chau" (instant noodles) and juice". They repeatedly mentioned how they did not need to purchase things from the shop (there was not much there

anyway) but relied on their own field, and how that has changed drastically as the younger generation do not want to work as farmers anymore.

A new understanding following this is that employment is a better form of livelihood (than subsistence economy), as market economy necessitates cash income. Working in the field becomes increasingly understood as hard labor and unlikely to fulfil material aspirations of people. Elders in the village are either working the field by themselves, hiring helpers, or selling their land away (often for new building construction). Labor is also increasingly commodified. While villagers previously rely on labour exchange for harvesting, house construction and public work (such as paving paths into the forest), people now are paying labourer and contractors, and public work is rare. In addition, the traditions and knowledge involved in self-production is also gradually substituted by new knowledge provided through modern education system, which emphasizes universal knowledge over local, contextualized one. As there are not sufficient opportunities to support the segment of population leaving subsistence economy, people turn overseas to work as migrant workers, sometimes risking exploitation, while leaving their fields untended.

If development is what happens in most developing countries in the past few decades, then the notion of 'sustainable development' becomes an oxymoron, as market penetrates communities and integrate them into the global supply chain economy, adding more overall carbon footprint while posing threat to social relationships, traditions, and environmental quality. But community development leaders are reflective and are gradually realizing that the ideal of development has not materialized and the process of its pursuit is not without cost. As a result, they adapt and try different strategies in response to the changes on the ground. For instance, Niroj and his team are gradually moving from advocating for education *per se* to questioning what kind of education they should engage the community in. This is a messy process, with seemingly contradictory actions at times, and is affected sometimes by agenda of external donors. My further research aims to record this process and its wider implication on social and environmental justice.

