Interview with Shankar Sharma

Shankar Sharma was Vice-Chair of the National Planning Commission from 2002–06. His term in office coincided with the increased push for gender and social inclusion in government plans and policies. He was previously Professor of Economics at the Centre for Economic Development and Administration, Tribhuvan University, Kathmandu. He also served as Nepal’s Ambassador to the United States, 2009–14.

On how the gender and social inclusion agenda entered government policy

Nepal had already initiated policies on gender and social inclusion, but the Tenth Plan of Nepal (2003–2007), the government’s five-year strategic planning document, which was also our Poverty Reduction Strategy Paper, included inclusion as one of the four pillars of development. It was the conflict that pushed the government to take this policy forward strongly. Studies have shown that where there is heterogeneity in terms of ethnicity, and disparity between different geographic regions and ethnic groups in social, economic as well as political terms, and exclusion, there is a high probability that the country will end up with conflict, if these issues are not managed well. And, because governance was weak and the implementation of planned activities was poor, improved governance was also included as another pillar for development.

On the perception that gender and social inclusion is driven by donors

Donors cannot do anything unless their assistance is linked to the government’s priorities, or else their headquarters will raise questions. The pillars in the Tenth Plan were something the Nepali government came up with. That’s not to say the donors did not suggest that while we focused on poverty reduction, we should also try to address the factors that may have fuelled the conflict and ensure higher levels of inclusion. They also provided us with different monitoring manuals, which were very useful because we either have to visit different countries and learn from them, or we have to derive lessons from already available material.

On early successes

Donors were moving away from infrastructure development support to the social sector in Nepal and worldwide. Since the Tenth Plan had mentioned social inclusion as one of the important pillars for development, it helped them focus strongly on that issue. In addition, the government not only increased budget allocation in the social sector but also came up with a number of innovative ideas for implementation. The government set aside funds for various schemes for girls, for Dalits, the poor, and for underdeveloped areas. These included scholarships, one-time cash or in-kind payment for parents who send their children to school, a school-feeding programme, expansion of infrastructure, a media campaign, and increased numbers of teachers. In health, similar kind of activities were introduced to address preventive and curative health care challenges. Management committees in 36 districts were also formed to improve health service delivery and provided free health care to the poor while charging nominal fees to those who could pay. Also, the Maoists did not target schools and health posts massively during the conflict. All these measures helped to improve social indicators in Nepal significantly. Nepal’s advances in health and education sectors have remained impressive.

Improvements in the social and economic sectors also help to reduce the problem of social discrimination. The literature says that improvement in education and economic empowerment related indicators could help in bringing down social discrimination to a minimum in a short period of time.
On community involvement in development
Since the Tenth Plan, the government has introduced the mechanism of involving communities in development activities. One prominent example is the Karnali Highway linking the western Tarai plains to the Karnali region, the most deprived part of Nepal. Everyone was demanding the construction of the Karnali Highway, which is also vital for the region’s development. At that time, due to the conflict, donor projects were not being implemented in rural areas. The World Bank had a few road projects but it wanted to cancel them, because they were not moving forward, including the Karnali Highway. The government asked them not to do so bearing in mind the dire socio-economic situation of the region.

Officials from the National Planning Commission visited Karnali a couple of times, seeking ways to involve the community in building the road. The approach was to give each 500-metre section on contract to different community groups. The immediate impact of the contract system was felt in wages, rising nearly three and a half times for both males and females. When the Maoists objected to the road building, the community took the lead in fending them off and eventually the portion of the road handed over to the communities for construction was completed in time.

Encouraged by that experience and other community-initiated and completed projects, the government also rolled out the Poverty Alleviation Fund. The government thought it would be useful for the people themselves to identify development projects and implement them. Programmes that involved communities were expanded in water supply and other infrastructure projects as well.

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On the current form of affirmative action policies
We do not know if reservations [quotas] are the best ways to address disparities or if there are alternative modalities. Reservations are easy to implement and politically attractive whereas the alternatives are difficult and take time. The best way to reduce disparity is through education and income-generating programmes targeted at excluded and deprived groups. Income opportunities are almost non-existent in Nepal. What the government can and should do is to emphasise quality and technical education.

Political inclusion helps, but only the enterprising ones among the excluded groups benefit from it; the masses don’t. But it has had the effect of reducing conflict.

Right now, the main source of discontent among the marginalised is the lack of economic opportunity and low representation in the bureaucracy. To tackle this, a scheme could be floated in which the government would educate 10,000 students per annum to bachelor’s level, selected from marginalised and economically deprived groups and women. The government would pay for their education and provide scholarships, and in return they would serve at least five years in the government. But, it would take time for the results to be seen and it is also a difficult path to take.

Reservations help if we cannot go with the alternative. I don’t think they will ever be done away with because of political reasons. And I doubt anyone will look seriously for alternatives, either.