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HELEN KELLER INTERNATIONAL

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Strengthening the capacity of local NGOs through food production and nutrition programs in Bangladesh, Cambodia and Nepal

Non-government organizations (NGOs) play an important role in social and economic development and in preventing conflict and restoring peace. Political instability, limited financial and human resources, and mismanagement of resources, limit the ability of a government to deliver basic services to the population. The NGO sector fills part of the gap and is estimated to handle approximately one-third of the national budget in Bangladesh, Cambodia and Nepal. However, many local NGOs have limited experience/skills in strategic planning, management, transparency and accountability, monitoring and evaluation, amongst others. Over the past 10 years, Helen Keller International (HKI) has worked with more than 130 local NGOs in these three countries to implement food production and nutrition activities. HKI's approach to working with local NGOs uses a program-based, participatory model to improve the skills of NGO-partners in strategic planning, program and financial management, and monitoring and evaluation. This model has strengthened the capacity of these NGO partners, making them better able to conduct quality programs and achieve lasting improvements in the communities where they work.

Introduction

NGOs play an important role in overall development in most countries in Asia. NGOs are often the most effective voices for the concerns of people and communities and can help to leverage local concerns and opinions among national and international arenas. Political instability, limited financial and human resources, and mismanagement of resources restrict the government's ability in many countries to deliver basic education, health, welfare, and employment services to the population. In Bangladesh, Cambodia, and Nepal, NGOs have responded to this shortfall, and the NGO sector has grown significantly. By now, there are more than 30,000 NGOs in these three countries combined.

NGOs vary by size, mission, target groups and geographic coverage. Together, they have wide geographic reach and experience in delivering services including health, literacy, water supply, sanitation, environmental cleanliness, and savings and credit. In addition

to implementing interventions, NGOs also mobilize local resources for economic and social development of communities. The direct link with communities, strong social mobilization skills and participatory approach of NGOs helps to build the trust of communities and households. As a result, NGOs can play an important role in preventing conflict and restoring peace.

This bulletin presents the results of HKI's assessment of the skills and capacity of NGOs working in homestead food production (HFP) in Bangladesh, Cambodia and Nepal. It describes HKI's method of working together with NGOs to implement a HFP program and how HKI works to build their capacity for the mutual benefits of this collaboration.

NGO assessment

In 2001, HKI conducted a situation analysis among NGOs working in the field of homestead food production in Bangladesh, Cambodia and Nepal. HKI collaborated with



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How Helen Keller International collaborates with NGOs

Over the past 10 years HKI has worked with local NGOs operating at different levels (national/regional), for the implementation of its homestead food production program in Bangladesh, Cambodia and Nepal. For this collaboration, HKI uses an approach through which it is able to reach large numbers of communities while at the same time building the capacity of the local NGO. The collaboration consists of the following components:

Strategic planning workshop

HKI organizes strategic planning workshops with potential partner NGOs to identify the NGOs that are most suitable to implement the HFP program. The workshop lays the foundation for developing a partnership between HKI and selected NGOs in which both partners fully understand the strengths, needs and constraints of their partner and are willing to work together to ensure the successful implementation and sustainability of the project. The discussions outline what HKI's technical and financial inputs will be, how HFP can be integrated within the NGO's ongoing program, how the program will be implemented and monitored, etc.

Proposal and work plan development

The workshop also provides training on how to write a proposal and a work plan. After the workshop, each NGO writes a proposal that outlines details of cost sharing, staffing, input management, timeline, and integration of HFP with the NGO's core program. And, each NGO also develops a detailed work plan for the intervention. Both the proposal and the work plan are then discussed with HKI and based on these it is decided whether a formal collaboration will be formed.

Program monitoring

Program monitoring is the quality assurance mechanism for ensuring that the key elements of the HFP program at both community and household level functions well. HKI trains NGO partner staff on program monitoring, including why it is done, how it is done, development of tools, and how to use the results to improve the program. In order to ensure that the monitoring is simple, short and integrated with the NGOs existing programs, the training focuses on the program of the specific NGOs.

Financial management

HKI holds the NGOs accountable for the funds they receive and requires that they also contribute money to the program (30-60% of total costs). In order to improve financial management, a hands-on workshop is conducted for NGO managers and directors to discuss financial management, accountability and preparation of financial reports. Other management practices and tools are also discussed in the workshop.

Involving government /local authorities

HKI organizes workshops at regional and district levels that bring together government, NGOs and locally elected representatives to present and discuss different program interventions and outputs. This is part of the effort to create/strengthen linkages between the program, the existing government structure at the regional and district levels, and village development committees/commune/union level health and agriculture workers.

15-35% of the NGOs interviewed. The main purpose of the review was to assess how the NGOs conduct their programs and the level of their managerial, financial and technical capacity. The assessment was conducted by visiting each NGO and interviewing their main staff involved in HFP, and other staff if necessary, for 1-1.5 hours using a structured questionnaire, which also requested examples of particular tools, such as those used for monitoring. **Table 1** presents the findings.

There was a considerable difference between NGOs that (had) partnered with HKI and those that had not. Of the non-partner NGOs, less than a third had a plan for managing inputs (materials, training etc) or implementation, only 20-40% monitored their

programs, and less than 50% had staff with skills required for training. If these proportions could be increased, the grassroots work that they are conducting could have even greater impact in the communities they are serving.

The benefit to NGOs collaborating with HKI

For the NGOs, the components of the collaboration with HKI (see box) fill the gap in implementation and management skills that most of them are lacking prior to partnering with HKI. As shown in **Table 1**, many more of the NGOs that have partnered with HKI have a plan for managing inputs as well as implementation, conduct program monitoring and have staff with skills required for training. While the NGO capacity

Table 1. Percent of NGOs, which conduct homestead food production programs (HFP) that have particular activities / skills, in Bangladesh, Cambodia and Nepal.

Activities/Skills	Bangladesh (n=81)		Cambodia (n=58)		Nepal (n=46)	
	HKI partner NGOs (n=27)	Non partner NGOs (n= 54)	HKI partner NGOs (n=9)	Non partner NGOs (n=49)	HKI partner NGOs (n=12)	Non partner NGOs (n=34)
Have management plan for input	82	30	89	20	67	28
Have detailed implementation plans	75	36	78	30	58	22
Have monitoring system	84	40	100	33	86	20
Have gender equality as a component	100	90	78	31	67	37
Have credit program	100	55	89	45	94	15
Have staff with technical skills required for HFP	83	70	100	38	86	28
Have staff with training skills	84	30	100	48	94	25
Conduct nutrition education	100	20	89	36	100	30

development component of HKI's HFP program was primarily targeted at the agriculture and nutrition sector, it also addresses broader finance and management skills, which have been found to benefit other sector programs of the partner NGOs (e.g., education, micro credit). NGOs have achieved the following through their collaboration with HKI:

- Improved knowledge and understanding of the importance of program monitoring
- Developed capacity for successful implementation of interventions
- Improved staff skills in program management
- Increased capacity for developing plans for different interventions
- Increased ability to identify and mobilize local resources, both material and human
- Acquired managerial and financial skills that also benefit other programs

This successful NGO-collaboration model can be used for scaling up other programs.

HKI's benefit of collaborating with NGOs

For HKI, partnering with NGOs is a very effective way to implement the HFP program on a large scale and to achieve sustainability of the intervention. In partnership with more than 130 local NGOs, HKI has been implementing an HFP program in Bangladesh, Nepal and Cambodia since 1990. In Bangladesh, the program has reached over 900,000 households or more than 4 million people.

The program has been shown to contribute to improved food security, health and nutrition, to empower women, and to increase income¹. And the changes brought about by the program have been shown to be

sustainable, as the vast majority of households that were ever enrolled in the 3-year program were found to still maintain their garden and its production of vegetables and fruits².

NGOs have organized groups or communities and worked with them for a long time for conducting interventions such as education, health and sanitation, and income generation. Often, they involve the most vulnerable households. Also, NGOs are skilled at mobilizing local materials as well as human resources for development programs. Thus, collaborating with local NGOs that integrate the HFP program with their other programs has been found to be a very effective way to reach many households in a sustainable way.

This way of collaborating with respective NGOs also leads to sustainable change because the skill level of local people is increased. After HKI support ends, NGOs are able to carry on the activities and continue using the skills that they gained by partnering with HKI. In war-torn countries such as Cambodia, where the local population has had limited access to formal education and training, building the capacity of the local population contributes significantly to the development capability of that country.

See 'Conclusions & Recommendations' on back page

¹ Talukder A, Kiess L, Huq N, de Pee S, Darnton-Hill I, Bloem MW. Increasing the production and consumption of vitamin A-rich fruits and vegetables: Lessons learned in taking the Bangladesh homestead gardening programme to a national scale. *Food Nutr Bull* 2000; 21: 165-172.

² Economic and social impact evaluation: NGO Gardening and Nutrition Education surveillance project (NGNESP). Helen Keller International, Bangladesh, 2002.

Conclusions

The NGO sector has grown significantly in many countries in Asia over the last 10-15 years and plays a vital role in mobilizing communities for social and economic development. HKI has successfully developed the capacity of the nutrition and agriculture sectors of more than 130 NGOs over the past 10 years in Bangladesh, Nepal and Cambodia. By working with local NGOs, HKI has been able to achieve wide-scale coverage of its programs while concurrently improving the skills of the local population to continue and sustain program activities. This experience has demonstrated the need to expand the management, technical and financial capacity-building activities of HKI's NGO-collaboration model to all sectors of partner NGOs, beyond those engaged in homestead food production activities.

Recommendations

1. More resources are required to build local NGO capacity in program planning, monitoring and evaluation, management and financial tracking and reporting.
2. Modify HKI model for capacity development to include all sectors, beyond Homestead Food Production.
3. Expand use of successful NGO-collaboration models, for NGO capacity development.
4. Identify NGO networks, such as HIV/AIDS Care and Support, as entry point for accelerated NGO capacity development.
5. Develop a tool to assess NGO capacity.
6. Facilitate better linkages between government and local NGOs to ensure sustainability.



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