

The Social and Health Education Project (Ireland) and Sahakarmi Samaj (Nepal)

Partners in Empowerment

Key Lessons from the 2009 Learning Exchange Visits

The following lessons were derived from learning exchange visits that took place between September and November 2009. A delegation from Sahakarmi Samaj visited SHEP between 26th September and 12th October and a delegation from SHEP visited Sahakarmi Samaj between 15th and 29th November. Each delegation included the concerned organisation's Chairperson and Director, as well as relevant programme staff. Visiting delegations were exposed to as much of the life and work of the host organisation as was possible. They then sought to surface and capture relevant learning from their experiences.

PART ONE – REFLECTIONS OF THE SHEP VISITORS

SHEP visitors to Nepal were struck by the following aspects of the context in which Sahakarmi Samaj operates:

- The essentially agrarian economy of the Sahakarmi Samaj work areas.
- The unequal distribution of agricultural land, much of which is owned by large-scale landowners or *jimindars*.
- The extent of landlessness and the necessity for many people to undertake daily wage labour for wealthy landowners.
- The importance of local common resources – especially forest resources.
- The vulnerability of local people to flooding and river bank erosion.
- The complex mix of opportunities and challenges arising from the border location of the Sahakarmi Samaj work areas.
- The heavy workload for many women and the consequent prevalence of uterine prolapse.
- The persistence in Nepal of a sense of community responsibility that has largely been lost in Ireland.
- The existence of defined geographical communities.
- The fact that many communities do not have a common history because of recent parallel immigration.
- The scarcity of credit and the prevalence of indebtedness.
- The need for many (especially men) to seek employment outside their home area – (generally outside the country).
- The weakness of local government following the civil conflict and continuing instability at the level of national government.
- The insecurity of land tenure for those who have been resettled by the government without being given land certificates.
- The gentleness and warmth of local people and the sincerity of their welcome.
- The complexity of Nepali society in comparison with Irish society as a consequence of caste, religious diversity and political fragmentation.
- The complexity of the INGO/NGO presence in Nepal.

Other things observed by the SHEP visitors were as follows:

- The enormous amount of work being undertaken by Sahakarmi Samaj in such a large number of communities.
- The clarity of Sahakarmi Samaj's position in relation to community development and the systematic nature of its development process.
- The sophistication of Sahakarmi Samaj's method for identifying marginalised areas and communities.
- The fact that, as distinct from many international agencies and local NGOs, Sahakarmi Samaj affirms and strengthens community competence. (It was recognised that Sahakarmi Samaj is trying to prevent or minimise a 'dependency mindset' by building capacity for independence. In the words of an independent Nepali observer, 'There are no *victims* in this programme').

- The fact that Sahakarmi Samaj's engagement with groups is shaped by a thoroughgoing analysis of their circumstances. (It was noted that the problem-posing 'codes' used by Sahakarmi Samaj are based on issues previously identified through a 'listening survey').
- The fact that, whilst recognising the necessity of external resources, Sahakarmi Samaj lays emphasis on the local resource base as the principal foundation for sustainable developmental change.
- The deliberate nature of Sahakarmi Samaj's engagement with local government and other stakeholders for the purposes of coordination and capacity building.



Paula Delaney (SHEP Chairperson) and Deirdre Lillis are welcomed by a Community Group.

- The fact that Sahakarmi Samaj has developed its own staff resources through extensive investment in training and ongoing support.
- The commitment and confidence of members of Sahakarmi Samaj staff with regard to the programme methodology. (It was recognised that they had a clear vocational connection with their work and that their practice was consistent with their values).
- The close integration of life and work for members of Sahakarmi Samaj staff and the challenge this presents for family life. (It was felt that Sahakarmi Samaj is like a community in and of itself).
- The skill of Sahakarmi Samaj's community facilitators and the thoroughness of their preparation.
- The scale and effectiveness of the institutional development undertaken by Sahakarmi Samaj, as evidenced by the number of functioning community groups and the existence of autonomous networking structures at VDC¹ and regional levels. (It was felt that these institutions open the possibility of exerting meaningful influence at these respective levels, as well as at a national level).
- The different character of the respective Main Committees and CBNOs², and the diversity of their programmes.
- The efforts made by the CBNOs to generate income from local sources (e.g. telephone and computer services), as well as through linkage with local government agencies and external donors.
- The high level of commitment and ownership among community group members and the level of support for the networking structures, as evidenced by ongoing participation by community group representatives and mass attendance at network gatherings.
- The accountability of the networking organisations to their members.
- The personal development outcomes arising from Sahakarmi Samaj's community development methodology. (It was observed that marginalised people had emerged with confidence and a sense of self-worth in their community settings. Qualities noted included participation, confidence, 'voice', democratic awareness, inclusion, listening, affirmation, deliberation, responsibility and inclusion. A 'can do' attitude was evident among those involved).

¹ Village Development Committee – the lowest unit of local government administration, equivalent to a parish in Ireland.

² Community Based Networking Organisations.

- The practical outcomes of Sahakarmi Samaj's work in terms of successful infrastructure projects – roads, bridges, fish ponds, community buildings, latrines, etc.
- The competence of the community groups in hosting visitors. (Two groups collaborated to arrange and conduct a cultural programme, which they introduced and explained very clearly to the foreign visitors. A *Tharu* community was provided the visitors with traditional foods).
- The confidence of community group members to engage with visiting foreigners. (It was noted that they readily accepted that the SHEP delegation had come to learn from them and that they had something to offer. Although they were very respectful to the visitors, they were not in any way self-deprecating).
- The ability of community group members to formulate and ask relevant questions. (It was noted that they were assertive in their requests for information about SHEP and the respective roles played by those involved in the SHEP delegation. It was also noted that they generally requested feedback from the visitors to aid their learning).
- The creativity of the community groups. (In one instance it was observed that imaginative solutions had been found to a lack of available land on which to construct latrines).
- The inclusion in the community groups of people from especially marginalised backgrounds and from different religious and caste backgrounds. (It was observed that the equal status of members was expressed in the giving of 'tika' - an application of red dye and rice grains on the forehead as a blessing - by the chairpersons of the community groups to all members present).
- The fact that, although Sahakarmi Samaj operates within marginalised communities, it works with a 'whole community' approach that acknowledges that people from all backgrounds have a role to play in bringing about constructive social change.
- The predominance of women in the community groups. (It was recognised that many men were absent from their communities as a consequence of having to travel in search of work. However, in a number of cases, where men were not themselves participants, they were observed to be supportive of the community groups. Some attended one group session to represent either their spouse or another female relative who could not attend on that occasion).
- The important value of the social support vulnerable people derive from participation in community groups.
- The relative autonomy of the *Mangataa* (an occupational begging caste) after 1½ years' involvement with Sahakarmi Samaj.



Liam McCarthy, Denise Gregg and Jim Sheehan (SHEP Director) visit a *Mangataa* community

- The value attached by community members to the group savings funds, both as a source of low-interest credit and as a symbol of group strength.
- The predisposition of local resource providers to provide support for groups initiated by Sahakarmi Samaj because of their proven capacity to tackle development projects.
- The value of generic as opposed to issue-specific community development groups. (It was suggested that the setting up of different groups by different I/NGOs can cause fragmentation of community effort and limited cumulative capacity building).

- The interest taken by neighbouring (less marginalised) communities in the progress of the community groups and their keenness to replicate their success.
- The extent and thoroughness of Sahakarmi Samaj's documentation and record keeping.
- The usefulness of the techniques used by Sahakarmi Samaj to monitor group development – ('spider diagrams' and 'group photos').
- The existence of a clear exit strategy based on the training of community groups and of local facilitators. (It was noted that a community member who had participated in Sahakarmi Samaj's group strengthening and group facilitation trainings showed considerable skill in facilitating a coordinating meeting of a newly established Main Committee).
- The skill of the members of Sahakarmi Samaj's senior management team, as well as their patience and good humour.
- The very positive affirmation of Sahakarmi Samaj by members of community groups, as well as by local politicians and other stakeholders.

Areas in which the SHEP visitors had questions were as follows:

- How exactly are the work areas and target communities selected? (It was realised that SHEP needs to get further details about the various stages of Sahakarmi Samaj's selection process).
- Are all the selected work areas and communities disadvantaged or marginalised by comparison with other areas/communities in Nepal. (It was observed that certain areas/communities were less obviously disadvantaged/marginalised than others).
- Are all group members able to participate confidently in group discussions? (It was observed that, whilst all participants were encouraged to speak, some were not significantly involved in group discussions).
- Is it realistic for representatives in the higher level structures to give as much time as is required of them? (It was noted that some people participate at community, VDC and regional levels; something that seemed very demanding on them).
- Will the CBNOs survive without external resources, and should they? (It was observed that the CBNOs were interested to ask whether SHEP could provide them with financial or resource support, although they were not too pressing on this matter).

Conclusions drawn by the SHEP visitors were as follows:

- The partnership relationship between SHEP and Sahakarmi Samaj is based on shared humanistic commitments and a shared critique of mainstream 'development'. It is also based on shared training methodologies and approaches (e.g. Training for Transformation).
- Sahakarmi Samaj has a clear and sophisticated approach to development. SHEP should define/refine its own model of community development in order to achieve similar clarity to that of Sahakarmi Samaj.
- To understand the distinctive value of Sahakarmi Samaj's work it is helpful to have direct experience of it. Having had such experience, SHEP should help Sahakarmi Samaj to communicate the importance of its work. (It was felt that SHEP could help through the development of academic and other literature to surface the distinctive features of Sahakarmi Samaj's practice model).
- SHEP should explore the possibility of adapting the community empowerment model adopted by Sahakarmi Samaj for use in the Irish context. (It was noted that people in Ireland may be less inclined to collaborate at the community level).
- SHEP should learn from Sahakarmi Samaj's successful work with the *Mangataa* community, which suggests the possibility of a more empowering way of working with Irish Travellers and other marginalised or alienated groups.
- SHEP should explore the question of whether its engagement with people need always to begin with personal development, or whether community development might not also be an equally valid route into the wider process of human development.
- SHEP's trainers, tutors and other practitioners should be helped to develop a deeper understanding of the collective dimension of empowerment.
- Like Sahakarmi Samaj, SHEP should conduct a review of the content of its training courses and make any necessary curriculum revisions.
- SHEP should explore whether its work in collective advocacy could be enhanced through a process such as that adopted by Sahakarmi Samaj, which facilitates leadership as well as 'voice'. (It was noted that there will be a national review of government-funded advocacy programmes in 2010 which will create an opportunity to feed in new ideas).

- Like Sahakarmi Samaj, SHEP needs to consider what balance to strike in policy advocacy between a 'chain of blame' approach and positive governance enhancement at all levels.
- In its community development and international partnership work, SHEP should be careful not to overlook the qualities and strengths of local communities. (It was noted that local communities in Nepal have important strengths, even though they have very little in terms of material wealth. The development process should not damage institutions that are already functioning well).
- SHEP should learn from the clear documentation of policies, procedures and programme elements that is evident in Sahakarmi Samaj. (It was recognised that Sahakarmi Samaj's methods for group monitoring are relevant for SHEP).



Amar Air and Narad Sharma (Sahakarmi Samaj Director) address the SHEP Annual Gathering

PART TWO – REFLECTIONS OF THE SAHAKARMI SAMAJ VISITORS

Sahakarmi Samaj visitors to Ireland were struck by the following aspects of the context in which SHEP operates:

- The general friendliness and helpfulness of Irish people.
- The natural beauty of the country.
- The low population density in rural areas.
- The peaceful and polite relations that generally exist between people.
- The relationship of mutual respect between people in different social positions (e.g. university students and lecturers).
- The internal sense of discipline of Irish people. (It was noted, for example, that they generally observe the rules of the road, regardless of whether a policeman is in the vicinity).
- The quality of the infrastructure and facilities available to Irish people.
- The evidence of planned development.
- The size and quality of Irish farm animals.
- The fact that in Ireland the conception of governance encompasses non-governmental actors.

Other things observed by the Sahakarmi Samaj visitors were as follows:

- The clear understanding of all those involved with SHEP of the organisation's vision and values.
- The distinctive qualities of SHEP personnel. (Qualities noted included gentleness, listening, affirmation and encouragement).
- The energy and effort of members of the SHEP staff team and of the Management Committee, who encourage and support one another to achieve the project's goals.

- The formal representation of the different practitioner bodies within SHEP on the project's Management Committee – (i.e. representation from the tutors' forum, the trainers' forum, the counsellors' forum and the advocacy practitioners).
- The sincerity of the relationships SHEP practitioners have with those who have difficulties or problems and the respect they show to them.
- The way in which SHEP brings people together and helps them to address their needs through self advocacy. (It was noted that, in Nepal, it is common for NGOs to play a prominent role in advocating on behalf of their clients, whilst neglecting their clients' capacity to advocate on their own behalf).
- The emphasis on quality in SHEP's work; something that is achieved through effective management by both the Management Committee and the staff.
- SHEP's good reputation in all areas of its programme.

Conclusions drawn by the Sahakarmi Samaj visitors were as follows:

- There are similar values and programme commitments in Sahakarmi Samaj and SHEP. (It was noted that the processes in the two organisations are similar and that SHEP personnel had therefore easily understood the logic of the Sahakarmi Samaj programme).
- It had been useful to have an opportunity to meet with representatives of Irish Aid, who had given time to engage seriously with the programme methodology and its effects. (It was noted that the experience gained during the exchange visit of addressing people in English had been helpful for the development of both language skills and confidence).
- Sahakarmi Samaj should try to replicate in its Training and Development Centre the peaceful, well-ordered, learner-focused environment that was evident in SHEP's training courses.
- Sahakarmi Samaj should build further on its recognition that the enhancement of personal skills (including a capacity for inner discipline) is important for the promotion of effective governance.
- Sahakarmi Samaj should draw on SHEP's expertise in counselling. (It was noted that, although Sahakarmi Samaj's community facilitators are aware of the basic principles of counselling, they lack a detailed understanding. Guidance from SHEP's Therapeutic Support Specialist had proved helpful; especially the suggestion that Sahakarmi Samaj attend to the life-experience of those acting in para-counselling roles, as well as to their formal training. It had been useful to review the support processes in place in Sahakarmi Samaj for those with counselling needs. Dialogue had also revealed the potential of the trusting relationships established by Sahakarmi Samaj's community facilitators to serve as a foundation for the provision of more focused therapeutic support).
- Sahakarmi Samaj should explore whether elements of SHEP's Foundation Courses might be introduced into the post-basic training programme for its staff facilitators. (It was recognised that elements of other SHEP trainings may also be relevant in Nepal).



Amar Air, Narad Sharama (Sahakarmi Director) and Jhabendra Bhattarai (Sahakarmi Chairperson)