

Best Practices

WATCH, Nepal

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Introduction

International Aid Groups recognise the need to adopt new methods of working that are more adapted to today's realities. They are seeking and comparing examples of "Best Practices".

AIFO presents here an example that concerns the working methods of its partner WATCH (Women Acting Together for CHange), a Nepalese association based in Kathmandu. This presentation does not cover all of the work under the auspices of this NGO which may be found on their website www.watch.org.np. Here the focus is on lessons that AIFO has learned, inspired by the activities of many groups that are followed by WATCH. In practice each group autonomously decides on its own course, which makes this generalisation rather arbitrary.

WATCH is searching for a new approach for rural development projects, so that women and disadvantaged groups become partners instead of subjects or objects of assistance. WATCH wants to abandon development based on external aid and introduce a development process based on self-esteem and which is sustainable using local resources. It acts through the formation of groups, microcredit and the transfer of simple technologies requested by these groups.

Many NGOs are operating in this field; however the strategies adopted by WATCH could serve as a motivation for reflection by the other organisations.

WATCH is working in the poorest rural areas of the country. This report is based on observations of their activities in the Terai, a very poor region of southern Nepal where ethnic minorities suffer discrimination; in particular in the Kapilvastu, Rupandehi and Nawalparasi districts.

Choice of working area

Many NGOs make their own choice of their area of operations. WATCH does not make this choice alone; instead they follow a strategy involving local authorities. At the District level WATCH visits the District Development Committee to explain their mission and their concern to work with the poorest: women, people with disabilities, people suffering discrimination resulting from leprosy or members of ethnic minorities. They request help in order to identify the most poor villages and support for their activity.

Having identified the villages WATCH meets, for the same reasons, the Village Development Committee, each of these presides over 9 wards – the smallest administrative units.

Social mapping of the target area (Transect Walk)

Before starting work, WATCH tries to establish a clear vision of the resources and activities present in the area. Meetings take place with local authorities: leaders of political parties, people responsible for schools, organised groups and other associations already present. WATCH proposes activities and requests suggestions, collaboration and information emphasising that WATCH only works with the poorest groups: women, people with disabilities or suffering discrimination because of leprosy.

With interested people WATCH staff take a transect walk of the area and while doing so discuss local resources, the people's quality of life, conditions and opportunities for improvement. WATCH requests visits to homes to learn about the living conditions of the families: the type of home, availability of toilets, their work, land ownership, crops being cultivated, potential for irrigating fields,



availability of schools for the children. The information is used to draw up a social map that highlights the population, ethnic minorities, the way of life and the resources of the village. In this way the most poor and deprived areas (wards) and the incidence of people with disabilities or suffering discrimination because of leprosy or their ethnic group are identified.

Within the chosen wards and with the help of local informants WATCH selects the poorest families by using **Wellbeing ranking**. They compile the list of households and present the first 2 names asking which family is the poorer. This continues with all the names until they are ranked by supposed wealth. They then ask to establish the line between the poorest (those that struggle to survive, who lack food) and the others. Normally the poorest are 40% – 50% of the population; however in some localities they represent the majority of the population.

Identification and visits to the poorest families, meeting only women or the people with disabilities

This takes into consideration all the poorest families and launches various action strategies.

WATCH visits all the poorest families, meeting only the women or the people with disabilities. WATCH presents its aims and by listening to their stories they try to understand the reason for their poverty (this might be surgery or some other serious event) and difficulties. WATCH observes the family's living conditions and the available resources. It checks that the woman is motivated to improve her living conditions.

The women are invited to a meeting to discuss whether they are interested in forming a group in order to act together and provide mutual help to get their voices heard. Some families, because of the complexity of their situation or extreme poverty, require individual attention. For these cases WATCH has

developed the **From Poverty to Prosperity** programme, which is not described in this report.

Give them a name

The first step that WATCH takes with the group is to officially register its members with the state. Unregistered women do not enjoy citizenship and cannot benefit from government services or cast their vote. In the case of their husband's death his assets pass back to his original family, leaving the wife and children destitute. People with disabilities are sent to the appropriate body in order to register as disabled persons and thus benefit from government provisions for disability.

Forming groups

Here we report only the work of WATCH with women.

There is some competition to form groups between various agencies, but WATCH tells each group that they can make their own choices and they can join any organisation. WATCH always encourages homogeneous groups. The members of the groups can therefore observe the reflection of their own depression and lack of hope in the faces and the behaviour of the others. In this way the group gives them an identity that is a true vehicle of empowerment. In the subsequent meetings, the women who agree to form a group discuss their



expectations - what they want to do together, how to collect funds and other common matters. Women's groups are formed with 15 - 40 members who meet monthly, assisted by the personnel of WATCH.

After some months, when the group has become more stable, WATCH starts a group training: it examines, together with the women, the social map drawn up during the transect walk. With the help of the women, it highlights the

opportunities and the possibilities present in their area. Group members agree on the establishment of a common fund, to which they all make a small contribution at each monthly meeting. This fund may be used as a source for small loans (microcredit).

At the beginning WATCH advances a small sum of money. Some groups, in order to have enough money in the fund, initiate a common project - an example is a fish farm using a pond rented from the local authority or mushroom farming. Loans are always repaid, thus making the money available for another member of the group.

At each meeting a president and a secretary are elected in rotation. One member of the group is elected more permanently as treasurer. The groups learn to plan activities in the short, medium and long terms, the women discuss how to obtain resources and share different responsibilities among themselves. Registration of

the group with the state is cumbersome, so WATCH takes a practical approach leaving them to decide when they are ready for this step.

Building self-esteem

The women are encouraged to achieve some improvements to their homes, by teaching them to cultivate vegetables or, with the help of a loan, to raise a few small animals. In a short time, they achieve results that are visible to all the family. Selling their produce allows them to provide for their children and pay school expenses. A woman might request a loan to buy a pair of goats in order to provide milk for her children. After kids are born she can sell them to repay the original loan.

Groups may benefit from common projects: construction of a small bridge, improvement of a footpath or construction of flood defences. These activities require and strengthen the cohesion of the group and its capacity to make collective decisions, resulting in achievements appreciated by the village community.

Where requested by the group WATCH provides the necessary expertise to carry out these projects. An agricultural expert teaches the women to grow vegetables that can improve the health of her family, a veterinary expert can advise on the selection and rearing of animals and a child care expert can advise mothers and initiate a campaign for de-worming the children. Where possible other women are trained and can replace these experts. WATCH works to reduce the cost of these activities - for example, buying in bulk and selling medicaments for the family or for the most common animal diseases at prices below those in the market.

Moving into the community

After about a year of activity and if the group is working well they are invited to a training activity “**Exercises**” that involves many groups. The goal is to make the women understand that they are not only members of their family but also of the wider community. Representatives of institutions and government authorities are also invited who, seeing the participation of so many women, become aware of their presence in society and of their political importance. Women’s rights are



presented and discussions held about how the group can improve, not only family life but also the wider community. Women realise that by working collectively they increase their bargaining power with institutions and authorities.

WATCH also provides information to women concerning public and private organisations that are available to help people in their situation and instructs them in how to set about getting help. As a result 200 women, from groups followed by WATCH, took the initiative to request the Ministry of Women and Social Affairs that they also participate, as very poor women, in training events organised by the government.

Women broaden their horizons through other activities organised by WATCH. They participate in discussions on natural resources, Primary Health Care, disease, food, education, agricultural production and commercialisation of the produce.

Recognising and helping others who suffer discrimination

Women's groups have helped WATCH to identify people with disabilities who create their own groups that follow the same development. Only the women can convince parents to overcome the stigma for their families and bring their children with disabilities out of hiding in the family home. Today, women are also helping WATCH to create Hansenian groups.

Women spoke to us about the difficulties of the men in their villages. They reported difficulties caused by alcohol but often the men of the village are also exploited and marginalised. In fact, the men must often undertake a long journey by bicycle every day in order to seek work. Often they do not succeed but if they are lucky they will earn about Rs. 150 (1.5€) for 9 hours of labour. The women have therefore decided to meet with the men to confront this problem together.

Uniting in Federations

When 10 -15 groups are present in an area, they are invited by WATCH to pool their strength in a Federation operating at the District level. If they agree, the groups must write the statutes and rules of the future body and decide upon their own contribution – personal and financial. Groups put forward their own candidates to the Federation committee. In one district the groups have decided that all the women will participate in electing the committee, in another district only the presidents of each group vote.



Following the example of the women's groups the Federation committee elects a president, secretary and treasurer and distributes responsibilities among its members. The Federation also establishes its own fund. WATCH donates an initial deposit to which contributions from the groups are added. Interest from the fund is shared equally between the groups and the Federation.

Federations are legally constituted local NGOs that respond to the groups and plan their activities. Federations organise training and seminars for the groups on topics such as violence in the family. WATCH only continues to assist the Federations for the time required.

A woman's Federation, representing some 1000 women, can negotiate more effectively with the local authorities to obtain contributions and concessions. In some cases they are entrusted with distribution of government contributions.

The Federations guarantee the backing of the groups. WATCH partners the Federation in this work. In the district of Rupandehi the headquarters of the

Federation is financed by the groups and constructed on land donated by the Village Development Committee.

From district citizens to citizens of the state

Women's Federations were among the first to put forward demands for change from a monarchy to a republic, for a constituent assembly and for autonomous regions or states within Nepal. Later, meetings were organised in Butwal, Okhaldhunga and Bhaktapur to present demands to the political parties before the constituent assembly elections. More recently, Federations have prepared rural women for elections; women and people with disabilities have been put forward as candidates for various levels of elections. During the assembly election some of them were selected for the inclusive list to the national parliament but none were elected. This result has encouraged them to work harder for the next time.

WATCH is still present but no longer needed.