

# STRENGTHENING LOCAL INSTITUTIONS: NETWORKS

"Challenges in Realisation"

6

LEARNING AND SHARING SERIES



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"Challenges in Realisation"

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LEARNING AND SHARING SERIES

**HELVETAS NEPAL**  
**Learning Sharing Series No. 6**

**STRENGTHENING LOCAL  
INSTITUTIONS: NETWORKS**  
**"Challenges in Realisation"**

**Abstract**

Networking has become a growing necessity in the present context of development in Nepal. Cooperation, coordination, and collaboration are essential if local, national, and international organisations and government bodies engaged in development programmes and activities are to ensure the most effective use of resources.

At the district level, the need for networking is apparent. There is a great need for synergy, minimisation of duplication, and solidarity amongst the district's development actors to enhance the impact of their work. Since 1996, Helvetas Nepal's Local Initiatives Support Program (LISP) has promoted networks amongst its partners and between fellow external agencies working in Palpa district. The outcome varies depending on the membership and purpose of the network. Overall, networking has been a positive initiative enabling:

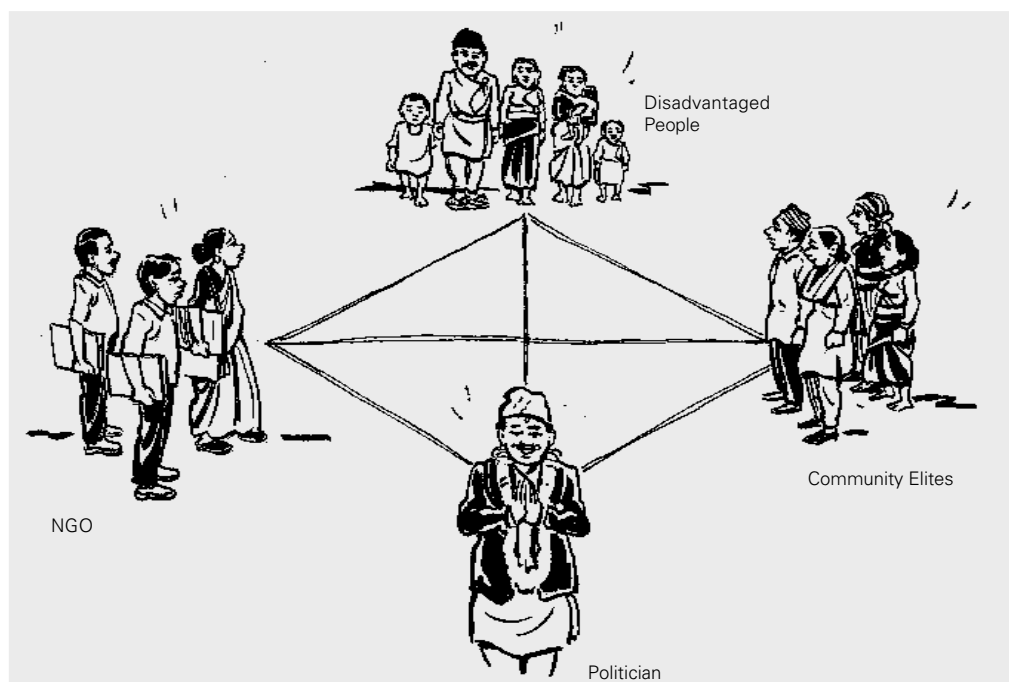
- Realisation of the need to work together (in cooperation) for the same goal;
- Pooling and linking of resources, information, and knowledge;
- Innovations by ideas, such as the formation of IDEA - a local resource organisation made up of Community Development Facilitators from Helvetas' partner organisations.

Helvetas has gained an important insight into the dynamics of networks and their members. The LISP programme's experience in promoting networks has shown that they can be either long or short-term relationships or arrangements, depending on the network's purpose. Members must have identified and pursue a common interest or concern, share the same expectations of the network, and demonstrate a willingness to share information and experiences. Only then can networks create synergy amongst their members and produce meaningful benefits for all participants.

**Networking ensures the most effective use of resources, cooperation, coordination, and collaboration.**

**Networking enables:**

- **Realisation of the need to work together;**
- **Pooling and linking of resources, information, and knowledge;**
- **Innovations by sharing ideas.**



*Community, politicians, and NGOs linked by the network.*

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## Acronyms

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BLL	Bridge Building at the Local Level
CBO	Community Based Organisation
CDF	Community Development Facilitator
DDC	District Development Committee
GiPP	Ginger Promotion
IDEA	Institutional Development Extension Alliance
ISK	Indreni Samaj Kendra (an NGO)
LISP	Local Initiatives Support Programme
LNGO	Local Non-Government Organisation
LSA	Local Self-governance Act
NCPA	Nepal Coffee Producers Association
NGO	Non-Government Organisation
PCD	People-Centred Development
PPRP	Participatory Review and Planning
PRA	Participatory Rural Appraisal
REDA	Rural Economic Development Association
SLOW	Small farmers, Landless, Occupational caste, and Women
VDC	Village Development Committee

### **Credo of Rural Reconstruction**

**Go to the people**  
**Live among them**  
**Learn from them**  
**Plan with them**  
**Work with them**  
**Start with what they know**  
**Build on what they have**  
**Teach by showing, learn by doing**  
**Not a showcase, but a pattern**  
**Not odds and ends but a system**  
**Not piecemeal but integrated approach**  
**Not to conform but to transform**  
**Not relief but release**

Helvetas Nepal and its staff have adopted this credo from James Yen, the founder of the Global Rural Reconstruction Movement, and bring this into their daily work.

## Introduction

This short paper, "Networks - Challenges in Realisation", is one of a series of Learning and Sharing papers on various topics of current importance in the Helvetas Programme in Nepal. It attempts to provide a country-level series parallel to the Experience and Learning documents produced by Helvetas at the international level.

The paper represents a glimpse of our working experience in the rural areas of Nepal, as seen by our operational teams and the staff of their civil society partners. It does not claim to provide an exhaustive or definitive picture of the topic under discussion. Instead, it is a humble attempt to document some of our field experience - a small building block in our learning and sharing. This document will be further elaborated as we accumulate more lessons learnt.

"Networks - Challenges in Realisation" brings together the outcomes and important lessons learnt from the inputs and support of Helvetas' Local Initiatives Support Programme to networks among government and non-government development bodies in Palpa district.

First, this document explains the rationale for networking amongst Palpa's development bodies. It looks at the approach adopted by LISP and the activities and outcomes of networking at each level. Helvetas has gathered some important lessons through its experience related to network dynamics and the need for clearly identified common issues or interests among members. These insights help to map out future directions for supporting networks.

**The Helvetas Learning and Sharing papers document the experiences and learning of its programmes in Nepal.**

**The outcomes and important lessons from Helvetas's support to networks of government and NGO development bodies in Palpa district are compiled in this paper.**

**This paper describes the rationale, approach, activities, outcomes, and the lessons and future directions.**



*People all working together to up lift Nepal.*

## Background

**Networks are formal or informal associations between organisations and institutions with an interest to achieve common goals.**

**Issues identified among the partners in Palpa included:**

- Working in isolation;
- Not valuing complementary activities;
- Not uniting to address common concerns or interests.

**Helvetas' integrating strategy is one of strengthening and linking development actors at many levels.**

The concept, promotion, and practice of networking form an important component of Helvetas' strategy of strengthening and linking development actors.

Networks are formal or informal associations between organisations and institutions with common interests in achieving a certain implicit or explicitly formulated goals.

Development activities in Nepal are undertaken by a myriad of local, national, and international organisations, government agencies, and families and individuals, so information sharing, cooperation and coordination is becoming increasingly vital. Networks offer a way to achieve this by developing a common vision and goal, and facilitating a more integrating approach to development by promoting complementary and coordinated activities to reach the goal.

### Rationale for Strengthening Networks

When Helvetas first began working in Palpa in 1996, it identified the following issues amongst its partners, and within the district development context:

- Groups and institutions were working in isolation;
- They did not value complementary activities;
- Local actors were not uniting to address common concerns or interests.

Following Helvetas' principles, the LISP team was eager to promote an environment of mutual trust and respect, transparency, learning together, exploration and diversity of methods, self-help, and local resource mobilisation. The LISP integrating strategy aims to strengthen and link the development actors at multiple levels initiatives, plans and resources to enhance their impact and ability to genuinely serve the community and implement programmes that bring local initiatives into fruition.

Networks play an active part in this integrating strategy by:

- Sharing information and experiences
- Increasing awareness
- Building trust and solidarity
- Strengthening members' lobbying and advocacy through a common and larger voice
- Creating opportunities for coordination, collaboration, and preventing duplication

Therefore, Helvetas, through the LISP programme, has helped local stakeholders to address the issues by creating networks among its partners and with other institutions/organisations, to promote a new and common vision of local development.



*People coming together to work towards their goal, a developed village and country.*

## Approach, Activities And Outcomes

### Approach

The approach of Helvetas was to:

- Educate partners about networks
- Demonstrate the advantages of networks
- Become a role model participant

Helvetas started by initiating loose networks with moderate objectives to:

- Identify and work together on common issues or interests
- Create synergy amongst Helvetas partners by promoting information and experience sharing
- Ensure the activities of district development actors complement each other.

The LISP programme followed different processes for different levels of networks - each based upon the principles of open information and experience sharing. The outcomes of the different levels of networks have varied greatly depending upon the members and the network's purpose. This section outlines the activities and outcomes of Helvetas' support of networks at three different levels.

### External development agency and INGO level

#### Activity

Helvetas' LISP programme had an unusual approach to working with local NGOs. It had no pre-determined support packages, but rather exploratory, 'learning together' principles with optimal financial and material inputs. At first, this approach gave Helvetas a negative image amongst local government and NGOs. Helvetas therefore wanted to come together with other INGOs working in Palpa to explain its objectives and to reach an agreement about approaches to supporting local partners. Helvetas also wanted to minimise duplication, develop a sense of solidarity among the district's external agencies, and a commitment to a common development vision for Palpa.

**Helvetas began by initiating loose networks with moderate objectives.**

**Different processes are necessary for different levels of networks.**

**Exploratory, 'learning together' principles with optimal financial and material inputs are better than pre-determined support packages.**



*Groups of people talking about experiences in community water projects, health posts, plantations, or gender equity.*



Helvetas initiated an INGO Network/Coordination Forum. For two years, the INGO Network functioned well. The participating INGOs took turns to host meetings every three months and shared programme areas, approaches and experiences, new ideas, and challenges.

Over the last two years, the level of energy in the INGO Network has declined. Recently, the INGO Network has not been able to use the forum usefully to share experiences and lessons. The INGO Network must revitalise itself soon if it is to serve its purpose and need in the district.

### Outcomes

- The INGO Network has enabled the members to share information on working areas and approaches with each other. This has helped minimise duplication of resources and activities and create understanding of each other's local partnership approach. It has also provided a forum for members to plan new collaborative funding projects, such as the District Periodic Plan, through a joint DDC/INGO Basket Fund.
- The INGO Network organised a public speech by the ex-Vice Chairman of the National Planning Commission that addressed the question, "What is Self-Reliance?" concerning the development of Nepal. The forum roused genuine public interest and discussion.
- INGO members visited the Helvetas partner Indreni Samaj Kendra's (ISK) working area for sharing comments and suggestions about the programme. It demonstrated to representatives from the INGO Network how Helvetas' approach of optimal support is enhancing local initiatives and self-reliance.

### Local partner NGO level

#### Activities

Helvetas initiated a network of its NGO partners (ten members) in 1997. Initially the NGO Network met regularly to share programmes, discuss common issues, and discuss problems. The NGO Network identified an irrigation project as being an activity that could be implemented jointly.

At the time, economic intermediaries IDE and REGARD were working with Helvetas, and supporting the NGO Network to implement drip irrigation and vegetable production programmes. The NGO Network conducted meetings monthly to review programmes, share information and experience, and develop future programmes. Helvetas, economic intermediaries, and other resource organisations participated in the meetings, seeking to improve their programmes and make them more complementary.

During the same period, the NGO Federation of Nepal opened its Palpa District branch. Amidst some confusion regarding the roles and functions of the different networks, the NGO Federation branch criticised Helvetas for creating duplication. Helvetas' intention however, was simply to:

**Promote information and communication sharing amongst local NGOs, increasing the exposure and cooperation between its members, and broadening the scope for opportunities and resources.**

**Networks enable members to share information, avoid duplication, and create an understanding of other local partnership approaches.**

**The NGO Network conducted meetings monthly to review programmes, share information and experiences, and develop future programmes.**

**Direct partnership with a number of NGOs/CBOs has been phased out and the initial form of the NGO Network formally dissolved.**

To avoid further possible duplication, the NGO Network reduced its activities to an experience-sharing forum between Helvetas partners and members that had joined the NGO Federation in Palpa. At the same time, Community Development Facilitators (CDFs) from the NGO partners began networking on an informal basis.

Helvetas has phased out direct partnership with a number of NGOs/CBOs, so the initial form of the NGO Network has now been formally dissolved. Helvetas has encouraged and promoted its partners' active role within the NGO Federation. NGO partners are keen to

take up leading roles within the NGO Federation, and have plenty of good ideas for collaboration and cooperation. However, they are not represented in the leadership of the Federation at present. Only once there are fresh elections can they hope to influence the leadership and enable the Federation to play a more active role in the mobilisation and building of solidarity between NGOs working in Palpa. Meanwhile the CDFs have continued networking with each other and their meetings have now formalised into a new organisation named IDEA (Institutional Development Extension Alliance).

### Outcomes

Networking amongst Helvetas partners has resulted in innovative new developments. Part of Helvetas' support to partners has been the development of CDFs. They are internal resource persons with skills in people-centred development, facilitating PRA, group formation and mobilisation, and organisational and institutional development of their organisation. The training programme for CDFs emphasised the importance of networking. Motivated by their new skills and exposure, the CDFs initiated a network, IDEA, for experience and information sharing, and helping to solve problems at the local level.

## Local Government Level - DDC Partners

### Activities

Helvetas has supported and participated in informal networking between the DDC and various district and regional development actors. The DDC itself has initiated networking at various levels and is a keen participant in local and regional networks.

### Outcomes

- LISP has found that creating an environment conducive to coordination, cooperation, and information sharing by networking local development actors has significantly strengthened the DDC's resource mobilisation and coordination skills and capacity. Such an environment has built the respect, trust, communication, and confidence between local NGOs and the DDC. This in turn has had a positive and dynamic impact upon the bottom-up preparation and coordination of people-oriented plans. The DDC is incorporating the plans and activities of local NGOs in their own planning (with ginger and coffee), and is more enthusiastic to utilise local NGOs in the implementation of DDC programmes (e.g. ISK partnership with DDCs and BBL in local bridge building).
- Palpa DDC has also taken the positive initiative to form a network amongst DDCs in Lumbini Zone. This network has identified several interest areas in which it can share ideas, make mutual plans, and access and coordinate resources. These include: tourism, road transportation, agricultural production and marketing, agro-based industry, and employment generation as common areas for cooperation between the DDCs. So far, a Ten Year Lumbini Zone Tourism Development Concept Paper has been drafted. Palpa DDC's leading role in the Lumbini Zone Network reflects its appreciation and understanding of networking and the different ways and levels in which networks can be utilised.

**Helvetas encourages its partners to take an active role within the NGO Federation.**

**CDFs have initiated a network, IDEA, for experience and information sharing, that helps to solve problems at the local level.**

**Networking has strengthened and built the respect, trust, communication, and confidence of the DDC with local NGOs.**

**Palpa DDC has formed a network amongst DDCs in Lumbini Zone.**



*DDC people and NGO people find new alliances.*

## Local Government Level - VDC Partners

**DDCs are responsible for the provision of technicians to VDCs.**

### Activities

Helvetas initiated a loose network of ten partner VDCs. In the first meetings, participating VDCs were encouraged to identify common issues and solutions. One of the first issues to surface was the lack of technicians available to the VDCs, a provision supposedly made through the DDC. The VDCs took joint action and lobbied the DDC to release the funds for technicians to be deployed at the village level. Due to certain legal technicalities (i.e. political interests), the VDCs have not yet been given the authority to administer the technicians, and their claims are still in process. The initial meetings were however effective in raising common grievances and issues amongst the VDCs, and brainstorming possible solutions and actions.

In accordance with the Local Self-governance Act (LSA), the DDC is responsible to conduct Ilaka level meetings with VDCs. The VDC Association of Nepal has also recently established itself in Palpa. Helvetas therefore decided to withdraw its direct support of the VDC Network to prevent duplication, and encouraged active participation of its VDC partners in the Ilaka level meetings and in the VDC Association.

**Ilaka level meetings have been discontinued due to a lack of direction and real purpose.**

The Ilaka level meetings however, dissolved after the second session, lacking direction and real identified purpose. The National Association of VDCs has unfortunately remained largely inactive with limited activities in Palpa. Helvetas therefore decided to resurrect the quarterly meetings of VDC partners for to discuss and share information about LISP's activities.

**VDC representatives lobby higher-level governments and organisations.**

### Outcomes

- VDC representatives have realised that through collective efforts they can raise issues and lobby higher-level government and organisations with a common voice.
- Through networking, VDC representatives are realising the greater responsibilities of their position and the professional qualities and level of education needed to perform well in their role. It provides a good opportunity for VDCs to learn from each other - strong VDCs giving advice and support to weaker VDCs. For example, a competent secretary from one VDC was able to teach administration skills to another VDC secretary lacking some essential skills.
- The exposure visit to Parbat inspired the Chairman of Yamgha VDC to become more proactive in initiating income-generating activities within his own VDC. He has become a district role model for involving poor and disadvantaged groups in income generating activities.
- The VDC Partner meetings provided a forum for Helvetas to launch and share new programme ideas. In addition, the meetings have contributed to the skill development of VDC members, and been a positive opportunity for collective learning, participatory evaluation, and feedback on the training for and preparation of the Five Year Plans.
- Formalised networking of VDCs within the district, such as the Association of VDCs is still primarily only at a political level. Opportunities for VDCs to network on development issues outside meetings facilitated by Helvetas are limited to the DDC Council. Networking could potentially take place at the Ilaka level meetings the DDC is planning to organise yearly.

**VDC representatives realise the responsibility and the necessity of performing well in their role.**

**VDC members have developed skills and now contribute to the preparation of Five-Year Plans.**

## Lessons, Challenges

The LISP programme's networking initiatives and outcomes at the local level have produced some important lessons. The team can now confidently respond to the different types of networks based on the experience and understanding of network dynamics it has gathered so far.

**Networks are characterised by the specific purpose of the network and the interests, orientation, and expectations of its members.**

**Importance of Relationships:** Long-term networks are often "relationship oriented" - members are committed to forging a long-term relationship based on trust and loyalty.

**Short-term single issue networks:** Networks can also function on a short-term basis, working on a single issue. Such networks are more "deal oriented", and once the issue has been resolved, the network tends to dissolve. This does not necessarily deem the network unsuccessful. Single-issue oriented networks can achieve positive outcomes and benefits for its members if they have the same orientation and expectations.

**Keeping Clarity of Purpose:** A network's longevity depends on a clear vision of its objectives. Apathy amongst members may result if they lose sight of these objectives.

**Common Purpose and Interests:** Identifying and maintaining a common interest among members is the determining factor in a network's success. If members are not pursuing a common interest, a network has little purpose and few outcomes. Alternatively, with a clearly defined objective on a common issue or interest, and a willingness to cooperate and share information as needed, networks can create synergism and mutual benefits for their members within a year.

**Flexibility, Adaptability and Openness:** Another important lesson is for a development programme to remain flexible and adaptive to the existing networking structures among local institutions, and newly emerging structures with linkages to national forums. Duplication can be avoided, and partners are encouraged to participate in potentially more sustainable networks and linkages from a broader spectrum of institutions and development agencies. However, at the same time, in-house sharing of experience and lessons, and informal networking among a programme's own partners is also beneficial to all participants.

**Impact of Politicisation:** One further lesson is the important influence of politicisation, or the struggle for access to resources on the performance of networks. Networks become politicised when they are seen only as a way of accessing resources, and self-interest tends to take over from collaboration and working together. The NGO Federation seems to have been initiated by those interested in accessing resources, not achieving the common vision for the development of Palpa. Similarly, the resistance by the DDC to requests from the VDC for resources to

**Long-term networks are "relationship oriented".**

**Short-term single issue networks tend to dissolve once the issue has been addressed.**

**A network's longevity depends on the clear vision of its objectives.**

**A network is successful if there is a common interest amongst its members.**

**Development programmes must remain flexible and adaptive to existing networking structures.**



People all looking towards common goal.

**The decentralisation process might only shift problems to another level; fundamental changes are needed.**

hire technicians is another example. It is also a warning that decentralisation from central government may not be a solution to politicisation and corruption, but rather just a shifting of the problem to another level. A more fundamental change is required in people's perception of, or attitude to, the value of working together. Helvetas' programme on networks, by providing people with first hand experience of working together, is a start in that direction.

### **At each network level there are key insights into the dynamics of networks.**

#### **INGO Network Lessons**

Helvetas' vision for the INGO Network was to forge a long-term relationship and understanding between INGOs working in Palpa that would change the existing way of working in isolation. Common interests identified by Helvetas were: making activities complementary to minimise duplication, and sharing information and lessons.

**Many members have failed to maintain enthusiasm and commitment to the network due to the "deal" oriented approach of networks.**

The INGO Network, however, has proven to be more "deal" oriented. Once certain issues have been resolved, many members have failed to maintain enthusiasm and commitment to the network. Meetings nevertheless continued. As changes in leadership occurred in many of the participating organisations, the direction of the network drifted and the momentum slowed.

Sharing information and experience at a superficial level does not realise the full potential of the network. Innovative and motivated managers committed to the objectives of the network, who can identify common issues and stimulate meaningful dialogue amongst participants, are essential for purposeful meetings of INGO representatives.

#### **Partner NGO Network Lessons**

The rapid expansion of NGOs in Nepal calls for effective and meaningful information sharing, collaboration, and coordination between development actors. The existence of a district NGO Federation in Palpa has the potential to bring about some of these qualities. However, due to lack of innovative leadership the NGO Federation in Palpa has not yet been mobilised successfully.

**However, Helvetas' partners have demonstrated how networks can in fact produce real benefits for its members.**

On the other hand, the networking of Helvetas' partners has demonstrated how the sharing of experiences and information and their willingness to cooperate and collaborate can in fact produce real benefits for its members. NGO partners have been able to share their organisation's approaches and promote their programmes in other partners' working areas. For example, partner organisations' groups have taken up coffee cultivation and membership in NCPA, and ginger producing groups have been formed in the working areas of Helvetas' other NGO partners. Partner organisations' groups have also joined the GiPP (Ginger Promotion) programme of REDA.

The formation of IDEA illustrates how networks can produce synergism between their members. The Community Development Facilitators of partner NGOs have taken the practice of networking a step further and have established a local organisation of skilled resource persons in people-centred development.

**IDEA reflects the trend of groups rushing to legally register their organisations, just to gain credible status to attract resources.**

The newly formed organisation IDEA, however, also reflects the increasing trend of groups rushing to register legally to gain credible status to attract resources regardless of their real capacity. It is too early to judge the impact of IDEA; but the CDFs remain confident that IDEA will serve both the CDFs' mother organisations and the broader community effectively with much needed social and organisational development skills.

Networking among LISP's former and current NGO partners has emerged as a network based on a long-term relationship. Its members are showing commitment to common goals and share a mutual understanding and expectation from the network. This has enabled

innovations and cooperation between its members and has set a good example of how networks can function effectively. Perhaps the INGO Network can learn from its local partner/ NGO example.

### Local Government Lessons - DDC Partners

Palpa DDC has proven that it understands and appreciates the practice of networks. Its strategic "deal" oriented participation in regional networks is enabling the DDC to pursue its interests in agriculture, tourism, employment, agro-based industry, and road transportation development. At the local level, the DDC's loose networking with district development organisations and line agencies is enabling a more streamlined and participatory planning process with real community needs and interests prioritised. Local resources have been mobilised and coordination with line agencies enhanced.

The DDC's involvement in networks will inevitably always be of a political nature. However, the outcomes so far have been positive for people-centred development in Palpa.

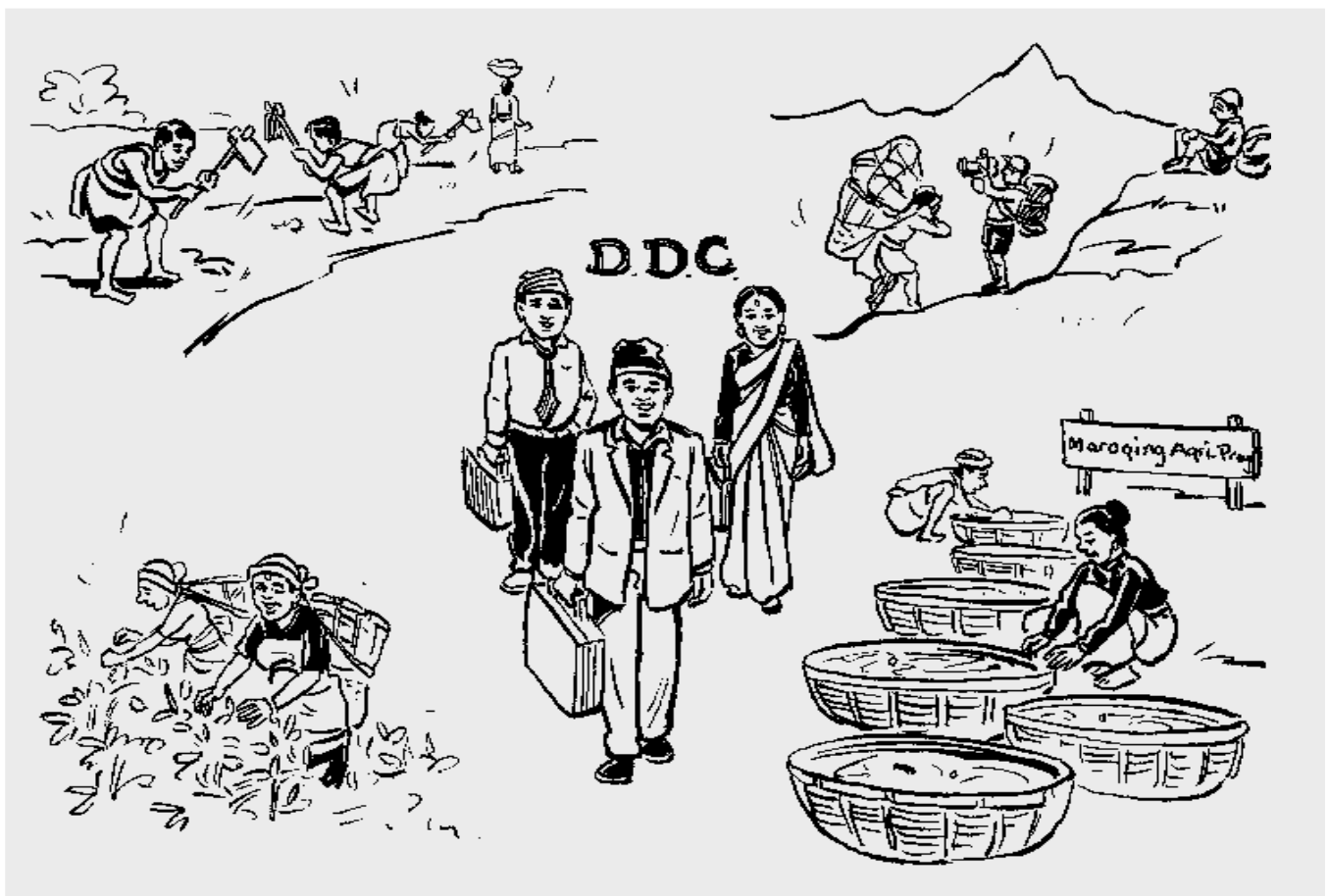
### Local Government Lessons - VDC Partners

Helvetas' experience in VDC level networking indicates that it is very difficult to separate political interests from the community development agenda. The quick dissolution of the Ilaka level networks suggests that common interests dealt within a short-term network "deal" is perhaps more applicable for VDCs at this stage.

Networking has therefore been reduced to meetings of VDC partners in order to share Helvetas' programme and VDC's experiences. Up until now, this has been the most productive union of VDC representatives and has prevented duplication of other forums. As the number of Helvetas' VDC partners expands, networking on important common development issues can be reactivated using the existing structures (currently lying dormant) within local government.

**The DDC in Palpa has been able to pursue its interests in agriculture, tourism, employment, agro-based industry, and road transportation development.**

**Helvetas' experience has shown that it is very difficult to separate political interests from the community development agenda.**



*DDC managing projects for marketing agricultural produce, growing tea, building roads, and promoting tourism.*

## Future Directions

### Considerations for district level networking:

- work with existing structures;
- Encourage partners' active participation in networks to enhance their work.

### The INGO Network can be used to discuss and plan DDC/INGO Basket Fund projects.

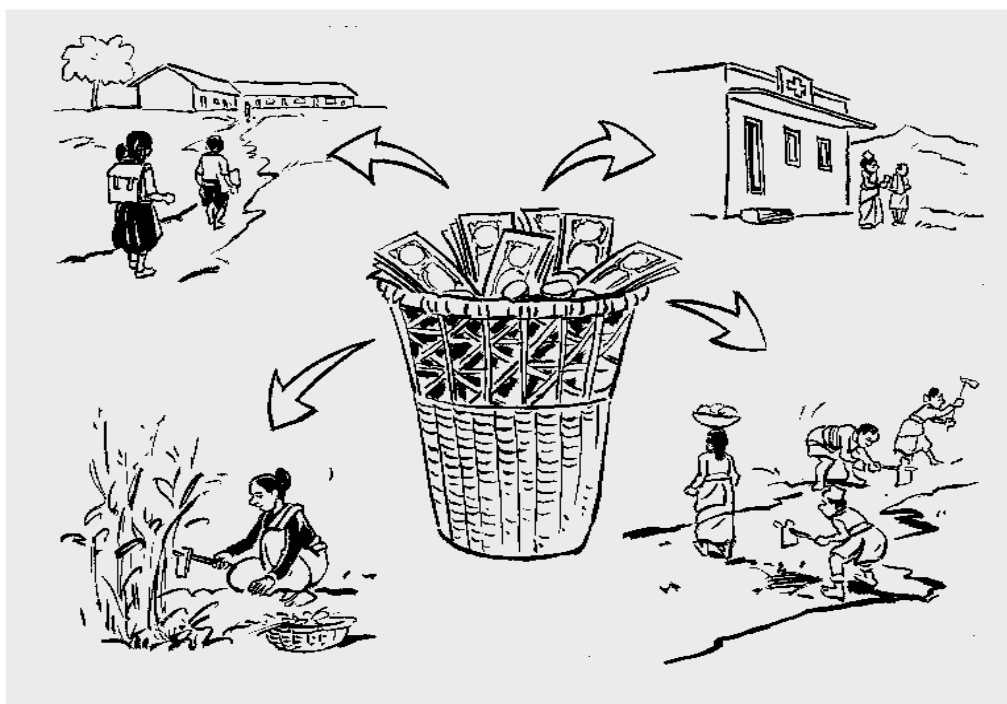
In the future, programmes working on district level networking should consider:

- Supporting networking by working with the existing structures within local governments and NGO Networks/Federation.
- Encouraging activation of these networks/forums. For example, encourage VDCs to utilise Ilaka level meetings that, according to the LSA, are a compulsory provision of the DDC.
- Encouraging partners' active participation in these networks, such as the NGO Federation, and helping to identify potential common issues.

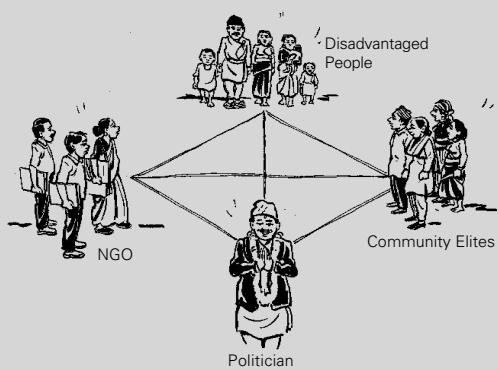
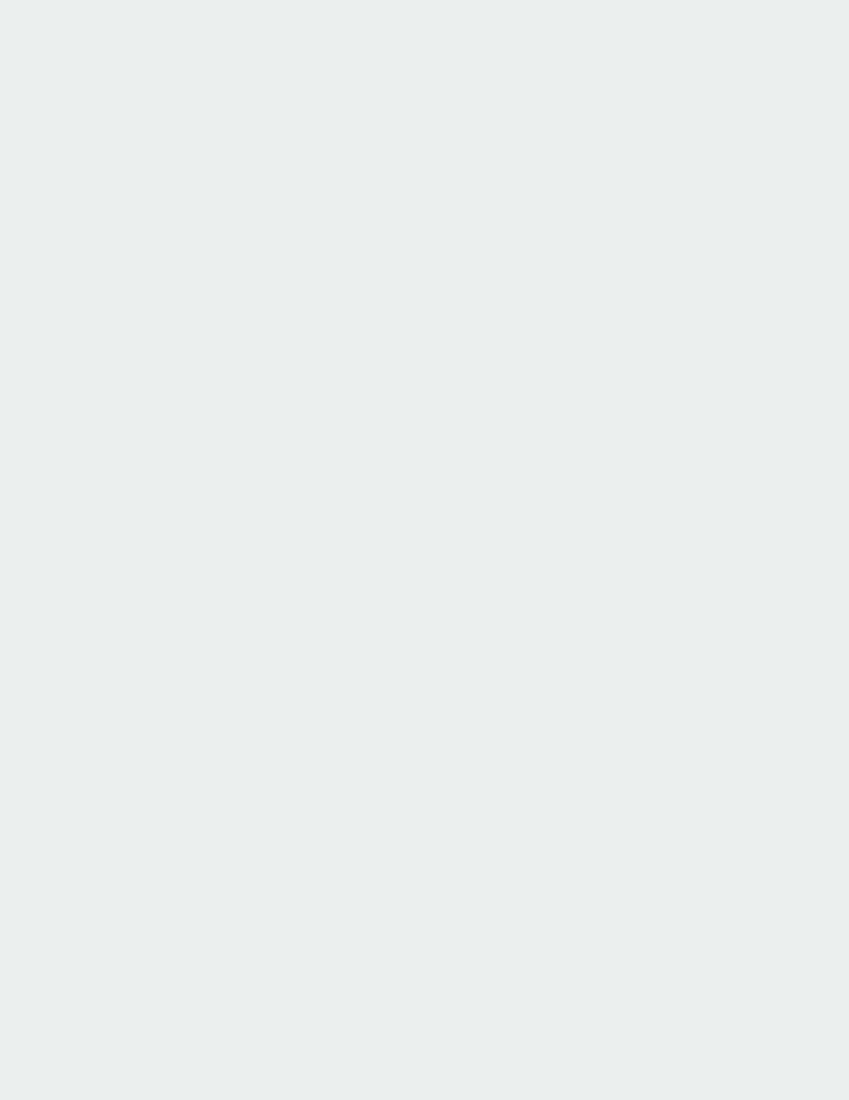
### A particular issue: How can the INGO Network be revived?

In the case of Palpa, Helvetas believes there is a need to continue the INGO Network as there is always room for information and experience sharing, opportunities for collaboration, and new concerns and issues arising in the development arena. The LISP programme is keen to reactivate the network by:

- Seeing exactly where organisations are facing problems and challenges, and using the forum to address common issues, thereby promoting ownership of the forum. For example, many issues and concerns have arisen from the current political turmoil, with serious implications for development actors (external and local) in the district. The INGO Network is an obvious arena for discussion of such implications and future guidelines.
- Using the INGO Network for discussion and planning of DDC/INGO Basket Fund projects. Helvetas is looking to support the DDC in prioritised areas of its Periodic and Annual Plan. Pooling resources from the INGOs working in the district is an effective process to prevent duplication of resources and builds a common understanding and support for DDC initiatives.
- Involving only the organisations that are genuinely interested in participating and committed to the objectives of the network.
- Making meetings more practical and efficient - twice a year is sufficient.
- The DDC NGO Coordination Committee could utilise the forum to assist in its coordination of I/NGO programmes and activities in the district.



Basket funds allow DDCs to allocate support to various projects in their district.



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