

Mobilising for change: building power in Nepal

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Context of the land rights movement

In Nepal, land ownership is not a choice for most people – those who hold power own land, and such unequal land distribution means unjust power structures are perpetuated and reinforced. Before the first movement for democracy in 1950, the ruling classes had taken agricultural land as their own property and distributed it to their henchmen, relatives, supporters and some Hindu priests who were not farmers. This created conflict between landlords and tillers, and such unequal and unjust land distribution is now one of the main setbacks for economic development and social justice. Unequal land distribution has been blocking the development of Nepal, and sustains the elite-based land and agriculture system.

Many political parties use slogans like ‘land to the tillers’, but when they get into government they are used by the landlords, and the political leaders themselves become landlords.

The movements for democratic change in 1950, 1990 and 2003 all hoped to overthrow feudalism, but none of these campaigns were able to take power from the landlords. Land reform only appears in election manifestos, it is never practised, and so landless and tenant farmers are always under threat of eviction. As well, there are many NGOs – national and international – in Nepal, but very few support the building of movement power; their focus is on project work which does little to address the underlying problems.

The lack of change through political parties has compelled the landless and tenant farmers to become involved in the nonviolent land rights movement. They started to organise, and in 2003 formed their own organisation – the National Land Rights Forum (NLRF). The NLRF mobilises landless and tenant farmers, and promotes livelihood security, social justice and economic development in Nepal.

Tools used by the land rights movement

In 1996, more than 258 cases were filed by tenant farmers, claiming their rights, and this became the beginning of the land reform movement in Nepal. The Community Self Reliance Centre (CSRC,) initiated the land rights movement, with a strategy of ‘cooperate where you can and resist where you must’.

Nonviolence

What is nonviolence, and why use it?

Nonviolence and power
Conflict

Strategy

Why things don't ‘just happen’
Planning nonviolent campaigns
Constructive programme
Education is freedom: popular education

Nonviolent actions

Forms of nonviolent action
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Training

Who has power in a school?
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Based on this, CSRC built a people's organisation called the National Land Rights Forum (NLRF), and strengthened them to resist the threats and assaults from the land owning class and government. The movement began with the understanding that social development organisations must carefully analyse the power dynamics which govern their society. Without such transfer of power, experience shows that there will be little improvement in the livelihoods of poor people, and there will certainly be no justice. In the case of Nepal, it is not possible to solve the present conflict without solving the structural causes of the violence, which can only be addressed by transferring economic and political power to the community.

Power analysis

The first tool of the movement was an analysis of context and power. Without such an analysis of the respective community/groups, it would not have been possible to build an effective movement. In the movement, there is an important focus on building knowledge of nonviolent action and land rights among the land deprived people – such knowledge is generated from the communities affected by unequal land distribution.

Through knowledge of their context, the land-poor people have themselves realised that without their own organisation and mobilisation it is not possible to secure their rights or change the existing feudal based economic structure.

Nonviolent actions

The second tool is innovative and nonviolent actions, which aim to grab the attention of the media, the building of power, solidarity from the different sections of society, and allow for negotiation with respective policy makers, politicians and government. Nonviolent actions like demonstrations, mass rallies, paidal walking (foot marches), reading and writing activities (for education, but also writing to newspapers and government officials), and cleaning the land reform offices (cleaning the local government offices gives the message that the mass movement is not only for land; it aims for broader social transformation, justice, and poverty alleviation – cleaning the offices symbolises the reclaiming of power, sending a message of “this is our office, too!”)

Meeting power holders

Two things are important for the power building process; bringing policy makers to the villages, and taking landless and tenant farmers to Kathmandu, to the seat of power. When the NLRF bring policy makers to the villages, and organise interaction between them and the tillers, this gives power to the poor people. They are able to talk directly with policy makers, and explain how political parties maintain structures that exploit them. Now, the attitude and behaviours of landlords is changing, because they see the power of the organisation for land deprived people. After seeing the relationships that the landless have built with policy makers, landlords have begun to realise that poor people also have access to the policy makers, and have begun to change the practices in the villages.

One of the Haruwa (plougher) from Saptari visited Kathmandu, and CSRC organised a meeting between him and the Minister of Land Reform. When he got back to the village he said to his landlord, “You said that if I go to Kathmandu, you would file the case with the police, but now I talked with the Minister – this is his telephone number!” In this way, the Haruwa was able to use this to establish more equal power between him and the landlord.

Organisation, power building and popular education

It is impossible to have land reform without a strong movement, and mobilisation of landless and tenant farmers is critical to this. An important tool for building such power is popular education, which helps landless and tenant farmers to explore what they can do to make change. Popular education underpins the land rights movement. While the large NGOs can facilitate the building of people’s organisation and social movements; it is only possible to mobilise the landless and tenant farmers if they are in control of their own, strong organisation. If they are divided, it is not possible to change national policy regarding land distribution. Popular education helps landless and tenant farmers to recognise that their problems are shared.

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Working in coalitions

It is very important that the people’s organisation takes the lead in negotiations. Other organisations can help by playing an active role in building the people’s organisation, and facilitating and supporting the movement, but we have to understand that there will only be change when the land deprived people take leadership positions in the change process.

Popular education processes helps to generate knowledge and power in three ways;

1. By empowering the landless and tenant farmers through knowledge and understanding of their society and culture;
2. By spreading knowledge of the nonviolent land rights movement with other organisations, the government and the public;
3. By building wider knowledge of land and agrarian reform.

The organised social movement will exist when there is knowledge of social transformation and land reform; popular education helps to solidify the land rights movement. Popular education also helps to develop leadership, which should come from people in the movement.

Power building processes

Popular education plays an important role in building power. Popular education helps to unite, collectivise actions and facilitate the sharing of roles in the movement, all of which helps to build power. Because the NLRF has used a participatory process for making decisions, it has been building power from the ground up. Before starting a programme, NLRF and CSRC think about what will



LANDLESS FARMERS GATHER TO DISCUSS CAMPAIGN STRATEGY.

PHOTO: CSRC (NEPAL).

really generate power, and have found alternative and innovative ways for the land rights movement to build power. For example, people could visit the district headquarters by bus, but they choose to travel by foot, to be more visible and demonstrate their commitment. When the movement gathers for a rally or demo, the NLRF members stay in public places, they cook for themselves and they share their food and blankets. Such actions create power.

The following five elements have also helped to generate power in the land rights movement.

1. Ownership

In Nepal, there is general mistrust of large NGOs (which are seen to rely on money from international donors). If the general public or the land deprived people found that mobilisation occurred only because of money from a funded project, this would undermine the power of the movement. However, if they know that the movement runs on the contributions of its members then power holders will look much more seriously at the movement, because this demonstrates their power.

2. Decision making structures

Open discussion and initiatives like paidal walking, encampments, rallies, demonstrations, and dialogue with powerholders generates power. Discussion in a small room, with just a few participants does little to create grassroots

power. When many people share stories about having the same kinds of problems, it generates power, because they feel that they are not alone in the problem/issue, there are many people, who are their friends. This also helps to develop a common action plan, where there is shared understanding of the problem and how to address it.

3. Demonstrating power

Mass meetings, gatherings, and nonviolent actions generate power. Because the land rights movement is able to hold bigger mass rallies than the political parties, their power is recognised.

4. Communication

Strong publicity of the issues and goals can create public debate that gives power to the movement and can help build solidarity.

5. Local contributions

Community contribution helps to decentralise power, and bring power to the grassroots. Innovative actions generate power and knowledge, as do powerful slogans and powerful mapping/visuals. The important thing is, it is the local mobilisation that creates power. Using local resources gives ownership to local activists, and makes sure that how we use resources is transparent.

Strategy

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