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*Environmental Change and Security Program*

## *Power of Local Natural Resource Governance in Conflict Contexts*

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*Edited Transcript – Kent Glenzer*

Let's talk a little bit about the SAGUN project. First off, here in Nepal, some brief background. We began work in Nepal in 1978, so we've been out there working in natural resources and other areas for about, 30 years now. Currently, our broad portfolio well beyond the SAGUN project operates in 42 districts in the country, and we have 21 development projects there right now. We're reaching, on an annual basis, about 4.1 million people with a portfolio that averages about \$10 million a year. And we have 215 staff out there; that's just to give you kind of a bit of a context for CARENepal.

One of the things that's important, I think, before talking about the specifics of SAGUN and the specifics of some of the interventions that we're trying and think have some success, is to understand a kind of a programming framework that's central to all of CARE's work. We call it the Framework for Poverty Eradication and Social Justice, a rather grandiose term for it, but what it fundamentally says is that in all of our programs anywhere in the world, what we're trying to accomplish is not always possible for a whole variety of reasons. But any program or project that we're doing, we're trying to make sure that we're addressing three different arenas of let's call them achievement or results or change.

First off is in the arena of human conditions. When we talk human conditions, it's just our jargon for immediate gains in things like health, wealth, nutrition and so on and so forth, those kinds of outcomes that projects normally try to achieve and count and be accountable for. Yet we're also trying in every project to clearly identify results with regards to the neighboring environment. You can think of this as governance in the broadest sense of the word; looking at changes in the political, legal, policy, regulatory service, market realities that frequently encode inequality and also encode forms of conflict and inequality.

And finally, social positions. We are trying in all of our programs to make sure that we are specifically targeting changes in the dynamics of discrimination, exclusion, privilege, the play of identities that, again, so often get bound up inside of issues of conflict and distribution of wealth. We've been trying to do this for about six or seven or eight years now.



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And I think that when you hear about the SAGUN project, you should be able to see some of this in action, and I'll try to make it a little bit clearer.

The SAGUN project is a broad collaboration, a broad partnership with some of the organizations that you see here on the screen. The chief of party is Maksha, and Maksha is the person that we have on the phone. He's been involved in this project for quite some time. Broadly speaking, SAGUN has been going on since 2002. The total budget since then is \$9.825 million, of which \$7.8 million has come from the U.S. government. The rest of it is from local matches from either CARE Worldwide Life Fund or other local partners.

The target groups of the SAGUN Project are, as you can see on the screen, community forest user groups and their user committees and the buffers on management council, civil society organizations, which are considered to be an important target of the work, and government line agencies. When we talk about government line agencies in the places we work, we're talking forestry, soil, water, national park, district agriculture, education, and women in development, for the most part.

The initial phase of the project from 2002 to 2006 focused on four different components: forestry buffer zones, irrigation, hydropower and policy advocacy campaign. In the current phase, which goes from October 2006 until September 2008, we've changed the mix of work and are looking right now at community forestry in six districts, livelihood improvements in 12 districts, bio-diversity conservation in three areas of the country, mostly around national parks, and policy advocacy. I can give you more details of what's involved in that if you actually have questions about it.

This gives you an idea of where the project is located in Nepal. As you can see, it's spread across the country. Nepal has four ecological zones: high mountains, mid-mountains, the parks areas, and the plains. This project works in three of those areas, not in the high mountains. We deliberately spread this out across Nepal to try to have a better demonstration effect across the country.

Broad objectives of SAGUN are to ensure management of Nepal's natural resources through democratic means, improve good governance in selected institutions, which I'm going to get into, and ensure equitable distributions, benefits and costs derived from natural resource management. But more specifically, what we're talking about is improving internal governance and technical capacity in user groups. This is about how to run a user group



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itself, but also technical skills around forestry, conservation and so forth. There's a specific component around enhancing the livelihood options for particularly marginalized groups -- women, Dalits, and the particularly marginalized and poor. This is designed to give immediate economic gains to these populations. Conservation and sustainable management of bio-diversity through people's participation and enhancing skills of users and their representatives to advocate for rights and concerns over natural resource management.

So that's just broadly speaking; what SAGUN is trying to do. I want to get to three slides now, and then I'll finish. About specific contributions that we're seeing, we think, from the SAGUN effort to questions of conflict mitigation.

First off, we'll talk a little bit about the kinds of governance gains that we think we're seeing. The first is seeing concrete gains in the capacity of user groups to do their own governance of their group, as well as their technical skills to mobilize resources for purposes of natural resource management and benefiting from those resources. So a big concentration on actually helping these user groups. They've been around for a really long time in many cases. But to actually do better internal governance, you know? I'll have a few more specifics on that in a second.

The other thing that we've seen is an institution like we've tried to accomplish and our senior institutionalization of a participatory well-being ranking in natural resources management. This is a process through which user groups in a collaborative manner identify in their own areas the different strata of households, and then actually target their work and their benefits and the cost and responsibilities equitably across those groups. It's just a relatively simple social process of identifying and discriminating this kind of ranking.

We have institutionalized what we call public hearing and public auditing in the groups. This is where the leadership councils of the forest user groups have got to be once or twice a year publicly accountable for their expenditures, their decisions, and so on and so forth. We have spent a lot of time on practices, helping groups understand rights-based approaches and understand how to do policy advocacy. We've seen some really important gains in terms of how these groups interact and relate with government officials and actually affect policy, both locally and nationally.

And finally, in terms of governance, one of the key things that we've done is on literacy, literacy classes, particularly for Dalits, so that they have the information they need in order to





actually engage conversations with their own leaders as well as leaders in the line ministries and so forth. These are just five concrete changes or improvements we think we're seeing in the SAGUN project, most places where it works.

With regards to actually having some impacts on conflict mitigation and prevention, these are some of the things that we're seeing out there. First off, we're seeing that in the user groups, there's a lot more incorporation of pro-court actions in the user groups. These are user groups that prior to the SAGUN project, frequently, the most marginalized and the poorest in these areas, actually didn't see these user groups as particularly interesting to them because they were generally funneling resources towards the rich in the local scene. This is changed. As a result, it's improving relationships between the wealthy and the less wealthy and the powerful and the less powerful, little by little. It's not a panacea, but little by little, it seems to be working quite well.

There's been a really important contribution in the area of corruption, in which some of these actions that I was talking about on the previous slide that actually led to leaders of these user groups that have either misused funds or made poor decisions, to actually return funds to the groups through the processes of negotiation that we're talking about and through the processes of empowerment of the most marginalized in those groups. So, as you can see, \$53,000 accumulated in a couple of cases that are being returned because users, members of the groups themselves, are able to hold their leaders accountable.

We've been using and popularizing with all of the groups, both Mary Anderson's "Do No Harm" approach as well as DFID's "Sensitive and Effective Development and Conflict Principles." What these have done are given local residents and local actors a different kind of behavioral model for having conversations, having dialogue, and making decisions. We've been doing a lot of work, and then user groups themselves have been doing a lot of work as well as the government ministries have been doing a lot of work around information sharing about the comprehensive peace agreement in Nepal, as well as the upcoming constituent assembly. What we think we're seeing is empowering of local people with regards to what the comprehensive peace agreement and other kinds of macro-political decisions are or not, what it means for them, what they can claim, what they can't claim. Again, we see this having some important effects locally in terms of relationships between government, citizens, the powerful, and the less powerful.





And finally, we've been engaged in policy advocacy on a macro level, and SAGUN staff and partner organizations in the SAGUN project have contributed quite a bit over the last couple of years with regards to national policy around forests, around irrigation, around the national water plant, to make sure that these policies and the implementation of policies actually benefit the poor; Dalits, women, and so forth.

Finally, what does it say about sustaining such conflict prevention or mitigation benefits? In other words, what are we, and what does SAGUN, seem to be saying about what we need to do in order to see these benefits sustained over time?

First off, the participatory governance assessment in natural resource management, this is inside the user groups. We think it needs to continue. It's been instrumental in sensitizing executive members and ordinary users about the governance status in the groups and preparing action plans for improvement of their own governance. So this moving forward is something that we think will help sustain gains if we can keep that going.

The wealth ranking that we were talking about, that I was talking about earlier, and moving that forward and sustaining that, institutionalizing that, so that in every kind of decision or most decisions moving forward, that there's actually a conscious decision about who benefits when and where from particular decisions is something we think will help sustain this.

We've been doing a lot of capacity building and institutionalization of training and training services with local resource people and particularly with women motivators. These are local resource people that can actually work with user groups on issues of both technical issues around how to manage resources, as well as the management and the governance of the groups themselves. These are now being actually paid and supported by user groups themselves, as opposed to by the program. Line ministries also, in the areas where we're working, are actually testing and certifying these folks as kind of para-forestry workers or water workers.

And then finally, collaboration and coordination with local NGOs, CSOs, and local communities around peace building. And this *is* peace building. Work has come in from other donors, such as DFID, and what we've been able to knit together now is a collaboration between SAGUN and these efforts in terms of trying to sustain some peace building efforts in the places that we were.





I'll actually close there. I know that's kind of a large dump of information, but I just wanted to say three things about the sustainability of these kinds of groups. I'm going to speak here more from my past rather than a deep knowledge of Nepal, and it's my work in West Africa, where I've done quite a bit of work with groups like this, particularly in Mali, in northern Mali. I put three things out for discussion, and I don't think these are new, but I think they're worth saying. I think there's three major issues about maintaining these kinds of gains.

First off, I think in any situation, I think the data says the gains are quite reversible, particularly when an outside actor like CARE or a project like SAGUN exits the scene. And I think that that bears a lot more thought. And I think we're seeing some good work in SAGUN and some other areas, but that data is pretty clear.

The other thing that becomes challenging is when you think of the long duree, over a long period of time, and what's happening with resources and scarcity of resources. As resources get scarcer and scarcer, what actually happens with these kinds of user groups. Some initial moves towards more equitable distribution of benefits and gains, but as the situation gets tighter locally, how long will this actually go on? Certainly, in West Africa, in Mali, we've seen as a resource, I've seen in particular places and studies where resources do get tight. These kinds of gains can erode quite quickly.

And the last thing is, I actually think that within each of the groups, it bears a lot of good social analysis of the ways in which these groups actually encode social hierarchy. And inside these groups, there are a lot of unspoken or tacit forms of hierarchy that are tied directly to social power and social hierarchy. And I think that we, NGOs anyways, and maybe I can just speak for CARE. I think we need to continue to actually really keep going at that particular question in order to make sure that these groups in the long run are not actually reproducing and replicating forms of social power.

