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BLOG

THE INTERCONNECTEDNESS OF THE ENVIRONMENT AND INFRASTRUCTURE IN NEPAL

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As defined by the Brundtland Commission, sustainable development denotes meeting the present needs without compromising future generations. In light of this, it is imperative to shift to environment-friendly infrastructure in a way to further development if we are to rely on the idea of sustainable development to tackle the environment-related problems of the world.

Developed countries already have sound infrastructural development, while the situation is quite the opposite for developing countries. For developing countries, like Nepal, infrastructural development is one of the greatest challenges it has been facing for the past few decades.

Since Nepal is a mountainous agricultural country rich in forest and water resources, it is crucial for the following: flood control; agriculture; hydropower; tourism; and green space.

Nepal is one of the most disaster-prone countries in the world. Every year, the southern parts of the country are battered with monsoon floods, whereas the hilly districts are affected by landslides. Both natural and anthropogenic activities are equally responsible for the frequent floods and landslides in Nepal, such as changes in the regular rainfall patterns, a rising population, etc. In the hills, deforestation, unplanned settlements along slopes, haphazard road construction, and improper land use for farming and human settlements has led to many environmental problems. Environmental friendly infrastructure can be crucial for Nepal.

Pre-requisites for any public or private development project

Before the initiation of a development project, an Environmental Study Report needs to be prepared. The report may include a summary environmental study, Initial Environmental Examination, or an Environmental Impact Assessment. The requirement criteria for the report are specified in the Environment Protection Regulation. If the criteria for the report are not met, the proposal will not be allowed to be submitted for the next 5 years. In case of implementation of the plan without submitting reports or not acting as per the approved proposal, the developer will be fined up to around \$13,000.

The developer in the environment management plan must state all the measures that will be taken to safeguard the environment, and must adopt different measures, in case one method does not work. An Environmental Assessment Report, stating all the measures taken and impacts of the project, must be submitted two years after the initiation of the project, or else a fine of up to \$69,000 can be levied.



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A growing challenge in effective implementation of Environmental Impact Assessments has been the lack of skilled experts and resources in different phases of assessments, like environmental monitoring, information dissemination, database management, and the incorporation of recommendations into design and contract documents. Nepal has not introduced the concept of accrediting experts and consulting firms to prepare the EIA report. Experiences from a review of the EIA reports show that any person can prepare such a report and hence, the quality of the EIA report is still in doubt.

In spite of all the strict compliance requirements, the EIA done for mega projects such as hydropower project, road construction, and airport construction have been found to be heavily flawed. A recent example is the EIA submitted for the Nijgadh International Airport.

The case of the Nijgadh International Airport

The EIA report on the Nijgadh International Airport has disregarded the fate of 2.4 million trees in the Nijgadh forest along with its rich bio-diversity, endangered and threatened species of wildlife, and more than 500 species of avifauna.

The EIA does not mention the environmental impact of the Kathmandu-Nijgadh fast track road, which is integral to the airport. Likewise, construction materials such as sand and aggregates, which will be extracted from the Lal Bakaiya and Pasah rivers for airport construction, are not mentioned in the EIA either.

In response to the PIL filed by a group of lawyers, the Supreme Court has ordered the construction process to be halted for now. A recent news article says that dozens of road construction projects have been launched without conducting EIAs in the Bajura district. 68 road projects are currently ongoing in the district out of which 54 projects in nine local levels are being carried out without EIA.

Other infrastructure-related issues

Nepal is a least developed country (LDC) with ambitions to graduate from the LDC group by 2022 and may achieve middle-income-country status by 2030. The government recognizes the importance of finding solutions that can transform their many challenges into opportunities for growth through a better development model and its effective implementation. The new federal constitution embodies a decentralized approach that will allow sub-national and national government bodies to share the responsibility for Nepal's development.

Lack of employment opportunities has resulted in an increased outflow of human capital. Furthermore, the accessibility and quality of ecosystem services have continued to shrink for the poor who are dependent on natural resources for their livelihoods.

Green road and bioengineering approach had been successfully applied to construct hilly roads with minimum disturbance of natural earth based on labor-based technology (without using heavy equipment), balanced cut-and-fill, and use of locally available materials.

To promote urban development in Nepal, the GoN, through the Ministry of Urban Development, has formulated a National Urban Development Strategy 2016-2030 (NUDS). The implementation of NUDS is intended to complement Nepal's effort to graduate from the LDC group and achieve middle-income-country status. The NUDS emphasizes the promotion of local and regional economic competitiveness based on local and regional comparative advantages and the alleviation of urban poverty.

The adaptive capacity of municipalities is currently low due to insufficient levels of investment and institutional capacity. Municipalities in the Terai, a particularly flood-prone area, are already facing climate-related natural disasters. The National Adaptation Programme of Action identified resilient infrastructure as a priority area and recommended one priority activity: promoting climate-smart urban settlement.

The biggest challenges to reversing the loss of environmental resources in Nepal are the cost and limited access to renewable energy services, inadequate infrastructure and lack of technical, managerial, and financial skills, loss and damage of environmental resources due to earthquakes, and lack of research on Nepal-specific aspects of climate change. Global resources including finance, technology, and experience are yet to be mobilized to address climate change challenges which ultimately determine several of the outcomes under SDGs.

Areas prioritized by Nepal's climate change policy and National Adaptation Programs of Action (NAPA), are to large extent aligned to the Green Climate Fund. Financial sector regulation can be devised to encourage private investors and commercial banks towards green finance.

More than half of Nepal's GHG emissions are from agriculture, there are GHG emissions resulting from diesel use for irrigation and agricultural inputs, with 76 percent of water pumps run by diesel in 2010. It was projected that methane emissions will reach 614 Gg by 2015, and will increase to 730 Gg by 2025 and 796 Gg by 2030. As a result, it is projected that total emissions in Nepal will reach 835 Gg in 2030.

The data gives an outline of Nepal's priorities while carrying our infrastructure development. Looking at the data we can conclude that, although Nepal is concerned about the effects on climate and environment caused by development projects, the actions taken are not nearly enough to safeguard the two.

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