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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

As part of the study on **Policy and Strategy for Poverty Alleviation and Sustainable Household Food Security in Nepal** (SPDD), a Participatory Rural Appraisal (PRA) was carried out in a Village Development Committee (VDC) in each of the districts – namely, Kailali, Sunsari, Achham and Mugu districts. These represent the western and eastern *Terai*, western mid-hills and western mountain regions of Nepal, respectively.

The major objectives of PRA were (a) to assess the household food security situation of people living in the different physiographic regions and various socio-economic environments and situations of the country (e.g. physical, social and economic) and (b) to examine the major issues and underlying causes of poverty and food insecurity, including policy and institutional constraints, at the micro level. It also aimed to explore how and to what extent macroeconomic policies and priorities have been translated into actions at the micro level and the impact they have created on livelihood opportunities and food security.

Specific objectives of the PRA include the following:

- To identify the characteristics of people residing in the rural areas;
- To understand survival strategies and coping mechanisms of rural folk;
- To assess how people perceive the importance and linkages of the different organizations functioning in the study area; and
- To assess the impact of macroeconomic policies on people's livelihood opportunities including food security at the micro level

The study used a variety of PRA tools. These comprise the VDC sketch map, the social and natural resource map, the gender-disaggregated crop calendar, the 24-hour schedule of activities, seasonal calendars, well-being ranking, the Venn diagram and pairwise problem ranking.

2 KEY FINDINGS

2.1 Poverty, food security and gender issues

The key findings from PRA exercise carried out in the study villages in the four districts are summarized below.

Agriculture dominates the economy in all the study areas. Dependence on farming was discovered to be particularly high in the *Terai*, medium in the hills and low in the mountain areas. The *Terai* represents agriculture that is shifting from subsistence to commercial in nature, with changes particularly rapid in Amahibela in the eastern part of the region compared with Pratappur in the west. Murma and Sokat agriculture is typified by subsistence agriculture with no sign of modernization as yet. Since Pratappur and Amahibela are situated in the *Terai* region, they were more progressive and economically better off than the latter two VDCs, which are located in the mountains and hills, respectively.

As shown in study, majority of the people (more than 50 percent) are considered poor in all the study villages.

Although it would be risky to pass judgment in the absence of other relevant data, findings in this study indicate that the indigenous tribes and *Dalits* benefit less from the current economic liberalization programme of the government and increased development opportunities created in the *Terai*. This is further substantiated by the distribution of households by economic class and the state of food sufficiency of different ethnic groups in Tables 4 and 5, respectively.

The study reveals the food availability situation to be worst in Sokat followed by Murma, Pratappur and Amahibela.

Most households experience food shortages from *Magha* to *Jestha* (5 months) in Murma, *Marga* to *Chaitra* and *Asadh* to *Bhadra* (7 months) in Sokat, *Asadh* to *Ashwin* (4 months) in Pratappur and *Bhadra* to *Ashwin* (2 months) in Amahibela. This problem was particularly acute for the poorer households, which sell food crops shortly after harvest in order to pay credits and raise cash.

Until seven years ago, before the construction of Chisapani Bridge at Karnali River to connect Bardiya and Kailali District, Pratappur was isolated from the rest of Nepal. The people of Pratappur then had little incentive to produce in greater amounts and commercialize agriculture as they were highly dependent on Indian markets for the sale of agricultural produce.

The study reveals how Pratappur agriculture is dependent on agricultural research at Pantnagar in India, particularly for rice farming. According to locals, Pantnagar's Sarju 52 rice variety dominates rice farming in Pratappur.

In Murma and Sokat, the local economy is sustained by the seasonal migration of male members of the family to India for daily unskilled labour employment. However, their earnings are still too meager for survival. Not only is income earned abroad low, but they reportedly also get cheated in India by scrupulous gang leaders or contractors. Since there are no available jobs in the village and nearby areas and since they need to save food for the women, children and elderly unable to migrate, male family members are obligated to work in India, whether it is their desire or not. Failing to do so usually means hunger.

Due to the scarcity of food and lack of employment opportunities, people of Pratappur and Amahibela also travel to the neighbouring states of India in search of seasonal daily labour work. If poverty appears rampant in Murma and Sokat, it is said to be extensive in Kharaula and Amahibela and among indigenous tribes and *Dalits*. While male migrants are expected to return to their village at the start of summer to work in their own farms, the study reported some villagers staying longer and traveling more frequently to India, particularly in Sokat. This is an indication of increased poverty in the village.

The study reveals that majority of men, particularly in Sokat, will not choose to go to India if only sufficient, remunerative and regular employment is made available in the village and neighbouring areas of Nepal.. If Nepal creates sufficient jobs within the country, people migrating to India will also benefit significantly because the supply of labour will decrease and this in turn increases the bargaining power of migrants, allowing them to demand wages commensurate to their work. Moreover, the chances of their being cheated by gang leaders and contractors will lessen.

The study indicates that when agriculture is subsistence in nature, women's workload is typically high as reflected by the case of Murma and Sokat. In general, women there spend 7 to 10 hours a day on reproductive work and 5 to 7 hours a day on productive work. Dominance of livestock in the farming system and strong linkages between the farm, livestock and forestry are some of the major reasons for the increased workload of women. Seasonal outmigration of men in Sokat and Murma has also added to this burden.

2.2 Development opportunities and interventions

Based on the PRA study of study villages in four districts following development opportunities and intervention areas has been identified.

With the construction of the bridge in Karnali River in 1993 and the completion of the East-West Highway linking Kakadvita of Jhapa district at the eastern border and Mahendranagar of Kanchanpur at the western border, indeed, the market integration of west *Terai* with the rest of Nepal has begun to take place. However, the Pratappur study reveals market integration to be slow and not encouraging. This raises important questions on whether institutions operating before and after 1993 bridge construction and the completion of the East-West Highway in fact changed their strategies and made positive efforts to help the region to integrate with the rest of Nepal. Moreover it is not clear to what extent the private and public sectors have built relationships and supported each other.

Due to the operation of Basulinge Sugar Mill after the completion of Karnali bridge at Chisapani, Pratappur residents have begun to plant sugar cane not only because the factory has ensured a market for the produce, but also because it has provided technical services and production inputs (e.g. seeds, fertilizer and pesticides) to the farmers. Government extension services and research have not been major factors to the expansion of the sugar-cane area.

Multiple institutions operate at the VDC levels, with more interventions and opportunities present in *Terai* villages Pratappur and Amahibela than in Sokat and Rara, which are situated in the hills and mountains. But little coordination has been noted among these institutions. The presence of multiple credit-oriented institutions in Pratappur with little interactions and coordination is a striking example.

In all the study villages, farmers hardly appreciated the role and activities of the present Agricultural/Livestock Services/Subcentres, which are the government's grassroots extension organizations in the village, as shown by the smaller circles in Venn diagrams. This indicates farmers' dissatisfaction with the extension services currently provided.

The PRA study could not trace any ongoing agricultural research taking place to solve the food problems in Rara and Sokat of Mugu and Achham districts. In Pratappur, agriculture seemed dependent on the availability of research, particularly rice seeds, conducted at Pantnagar India. Meanwhile, Amahibela agriculture seemed totally dependent on the initiatives of local farmers. Due to the market and roads, farmers have generally been expanding vegetable areas to raise cash but the Government support of this endeavour seemed minimal.

In general, women had less contact with the outside world compared to men and their mobility was generally confined within the village and district. Women's contact with the outside world was least in Murma followed by Sokat, Pratappur and Amahibela. Apparently, the better the quality of infrastructure facilities, the greater was the contact of women with the outside world.

Table below summarizes household food insecurity, the reasons underlying farmers' problems and livelihood strategies to cope with their situation based on case studies of the four villages.

Table: Farmers' problems, causes and farmer livelihood strategies

Problem	Causes	Livelihood strategies
Seasonal staple food shortages	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Low productivity - Lack of irrigation - Poor services from government agricultural extension systems and weak research activity - Lack of modern agricultural inputs - Declining soil fertility 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Seasonal migration to India (Murma and Sokat) - Selling livestock to buy food - Eating fewer meals per day - Traveling to neighbouring districts of India in search of wage labour (Kharaula and Belaha) - Sugar cane cultivation (richer households in Kharaula and Belaha) - Vegetable farming (Belaha)
Rainfed agriculture	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Lack of surface irrigation facilities - Reduction in government subsidies 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Growing rainfed crops such as upland rice, maize and millets (Murma and Sokat)
Lack of employment or work opportunities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Lack of government investments and programmes to increase employment opportunities at the village level 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Seasonal migration to India (Murma and Sokat) - Traveling to neighbouring districts of India in search of wage labour (Kharaula and Belaha)
Lack of coordination and linkages among development agencies	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Sectoral approach followed by the village-based intervening agencies - Operation of multiple agencies with nearly common objectives and programmes(e.g. in Kharaula, Amahibela) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Not applicable

3. CONCLUSIONS

As the study moved down from Rara Village of Mugu, a midwestern mountain district, to Sokat Village of Achham district, the following were noted:

- Outmigration of male members of the family became regular rather than seasonal and their period of stay lengthened.
- Development opportunities decreased.
- Food availability increased due to increased availability of agricultural land suitable for cereal crops cultivation.
- Daily and seasonal workload of women decreased.

As the study moved from Pratappur VDC of Kailali district in the far west *Terai* to Amahibela VDC of Sunsari district in the eastern *Terai*, the following observations were noted:

- History of settlement was typically longer.
- Out migration of the poor in search of daily labour work declined substantially.
- Population density increased.
- The proportion of households experiencing food scarcity decreased.
- The shift from subsistence to commercial agriculture was found to be rapid.
- Dependency on agricultural research of India declined
- Poverty level decreased.
- Daily and seasonal workload of women decreased.

Pratappur and Amahibela exemplifies how the *Terai* remains the area with the best potential to provide basic food and industrial crops for Nepal. Despite both *Terai* study villages producing surplus food in aggregate, majority produce less than required for the whole year. Many poor households sell their food crops shortly after the harvest in order to clear their debts and raise cash but then later purchase these same items at much high prices through income earned from their sale of labour or livestock.

The economy of Rara, Karnali and nearly the whole of the mid and far western hills seemed dependent on their wages from unskilled labour employment in India. Unless this situation is reversed and seasonal migration becomes just one of the alternatives available to villagers, neither the food security nor the poverty situation will change in the near future. The importance of seasonal migration was more pronounced and visible in Mugu, the most inaccessible district in the mountains. This was followed by Achham, the district in the hills, Kailali district in the western *Terai* and Sunsari district in the eastern *Terai*.

Villagers used to go to India for a fixed number of months and return in time to support their families in farming. However, with the increased incidence of poverty, the system appears to be disintegrating and people now overstay in India to pay their debts back at home or to earn what little they can support the families for a few months.

Even if increased employment opportunities and availability of jobs in Nepal are not likely to bring down the level of outmigration to zero for several reasons, this study reveals that the flow of people will decrease provided that sufficient jobs are available in the village and neighbouring areas.

Although livestock formed an integral part of the mountain farming system and used to play critical role in sustaining local livelihoods, this study found the contribution of the sector to be declining.

The interdependency among the three rural subsectors – farming, animal husbandry, and forestry – is unique to the Nepalese farming system. A small imbalance in one sector can bring the entire crop-livestock-forestry equation to a breaking point as has happened in Rara VDC in Mugu District.

Farmers still face all sorts of problems of traditional agricultural development such as the lack of improved seeds, fertilizers, equipment, etc. People's access to external inputs such as chemical fertilizers, seeds, veterinary medicines and credit was relatively poor.

The impact of APP has not been visible at the village levels in terms of increased use of fertilizers, wider irrigated areas and increased adoption of new and improved technologies. District officials are not fully aware of the APP's strategies and approaches and appear to be confused about the prevailing policy. There have not been adequate efforts made to facilitate implementation of APP from the central level. This seemed to have suffered due to the lack of resources, weak commitment and poor monitoring and supervision and aggravated by unclear objectives, inadequate planning and resource provisions.

The impact of agricultural extension appears poor and people in all the study VDCs hardly appreciate the present role of the local agricultural extension service system, both the Agricultural Service Centres (ASCs) and the Livestock Service Centres (LSCs). The triangular linkages between farmers, research and extension have been very weak. Women hardly have access to extension services.

Although women are found increasingly involved in various saving and credit programmes run by different agencies, it seems unlikely that they will contribute much to generating employment for women or to their economic empowerment. Apart from built-in weaknesses such as limited coverage, this can be attributed to duplications, lack of coordination and poor linkages among the promoters.

The lack of coordination and linkages among the different organizations operating in the VDC continues to be a problem. The importance of complementarities still has to be realized by the people working at different organizations at different levels.

Development of Karnali region, one of the most remote mountainous regions of the country, is unlikely with the general national development strategy integrated with liberal markets. Formulation of a strategy that takes into account the needs and aspirations of the people, local resources (e.g. human power, natural resources) and opportunities and constraints is urgent for the development of the region.