



**IDS WORKING PAPER**

Volume **2013** No **421**

**Accountability at the Local Level  
in Fragile Contexts: Nepal Case Study**

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April 2013



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IDS Working Paper 421

First published by the Institute of Development Studies in April 2013

© Institute of Development Studies 2013

ISSN: 2040-0209 ISBN: 978-1-78118-112-6

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# Accountability at the Local Level in Fragile Contexts: Nepal Case Study

Ottavia Cima

## Summary

This paper presents the Nepal case study from a research project on accountability carried out in three countries. The research project aimed at identifying practices and factors contributing to the success of accountability initiatives in fragile contexts. In the case of Nepal, the research focused on the relationship between the state and its citizens and on the accountability mechanisms operating on the supply side and demand side of that relationship. This relationship was observed in the framework of a trail bridge project implemented with a community approach and including the Public Audit Practice, an accountability tool developed in Nepal by Helvetas Swiss Intercooperation.

This paper argues that the public meetings held in the framework of the Public Audit Practice, as well as the trail bridge user committee, represent participatory spaces that are created by the project organisation but whose boundaries and internal functioning are shaped by (in part pre-existing) power relations. Furthermore, the active engagement of villagers in these spaces can represent an opportunity for 'empowerment', mostly in the form of the building of a network of useful contacts within and outside the community. However, in a context of polarised power structures and discriminatory social and cultural traditions, the meaningful participation of traditionally disadvantaged groups is limited.

The findings also suggest that, in this context, accountability, and in particular the information-sharing process, assumes rather informal forms. This has to be considered in the planning of interventions so that the positive potential can be exploited and the risk of exclusion inherent to informal practices can be reduced.

Finally, the paper argues that it is the space of the user committee that represents an accountability tool, while the space of the Public Audit Practice is more a symbolic one that can be used to build trust in, and legitimacy of, the actors involved.

**Key words:** Accountability, social accountability, Nepal, participation, participatory spaces, development intervention, international organisations, NGOs, empowerment

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**Helvetas Swiss Intercooperation** is a development non-governmental organisation, one of the largest and most experienced in Switzerland. It came into existence on 1 July 2011 through the merger of two organisations, Helvetas (founded in 1955) and Intercooperation (founded in 1982). For further information see [http://www.helvetas.org/about\\_us/](http://www.helvetas.org/about_us/).

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# Acknowledgements

My acknowledgement goes to the many people who made this study possible. To Celestine Krösschell, Team Leader Governance and Peace at the head office of Helvetas Swiss Intercooperation (HELVETAS) in Zurich, who was the initiator and coordinator of the whole research project; to Rosemary McGee, Research Fellow at the Institute of Development Studies at the University of Sussex, who supported the researchers with her precious experience; to Benedikt Korf, Professor at the Department of Geography at the University of Zurich, who supervised my research process. Of course, my enormous gratitude goes to all the people I met during my stay in Nepal, giving me precious information, suggestions, support. In particular I would like to thank Badri P. Manandhar, Programme Coordinator Governance and Peace of HELVETAS Nepal, without whom the implementation of the research would not have been possible; Bijaya Dahal, student at the Institute of Development Studies at the University of Kathmandu, who completed the country research team; the whole staff of HELVETAS Nepal, which welcomed me to its country and offices, in particular Shiva P. Aryal, Country Director, and the whole staff of the Trail Bridge Support Unit; and of course all villagers and local people, to whom this research belongs. Daniela Buchmann from the University of Lausanne and Marco Faehndrich from the Swiss Federal Institute of Technology of Zurich also contributed to this country study with friendly and stimulating support and with their experience from Bangladesh and Mozambique, respectively.

Special thanks go also to Andrea Nigsch, who helped make up for my linguistic weaknesses, and to Alice Kern and Pascal Haltiner, colleagues of studies at the Department of Geography in Zurich.

Although I am indebted to all these persons for their help and suggestions, I assume full responsibility for the opinions expressed in this report.

## Abbreviations

APM	All-Party Mechanism
CIAA	Commission for Investigation of Abuse of Authority
CSC	Community Score Card
DDC	District Development Committee (used both in strict sense as the executive body at district level, and in broader sense to mean the <i>district level</i> in general)
DTO	District Technical Office
ETH	Swiss Federal Institute of Technology, Zurich
GDP	Gross Domestic Product
GoN	Government of Nepal
HELVETAS	Helvetas Swiss Intercooperation
IDS	Institute of Development Studies (University of Sussex)
INGO	International Non-Governmental Organisation
LDO	Local Development Officer
LGCDP	Local Governance and Community Development Programme
LSGA	Local Self Governance Act
LSGR	Local Self Governance Regulation
LSP	Local Service Provider
MoLD	Ministry of Local Development
NADEL	Centre for Development and Cooperation at ETH, Zurich
NGO	Non-governmental organisation
PA	Public Audit
PAP	Public Audit Practice
PH	Public Hearing

PR Public Review  
PRA Participatory Rural Appraisal  
SDC Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation  
SWAp Sector Wide Approach  
TBSU Trail Bridge Support Unit  
UC User Committee  
VDC Village Development Committee (like DDC is used both in strict and broad sense)



*Public Hearing in Nepal, photo by Ottavia Cima*

# 1 Introduction

Approaches to development interventions have been changing markedly over the years and decades. The idea of development from the grassroots, with the active involvement of local population in its own development, has slowly taken the place of more central approaches promoting interventions driven from above by development institutions. The *state*, of course, is a central actor in development and should be the set of institutions that ensures both basic rights and basic services for its citizens. However, historically states have often played the opposite role, oppressing their citizens, limiting their liberties and hampering an inclusive and long-lasting development.

Over the decades, the attitude of development institutions towards the figure of the state has undergone many changes, too. While at the very beginning development aid was channelled directly into governmental finances, experiences of corruption, hijacking of development funds and little effectiveness of aid led to a shift in the focus of aid to the grassroots level. In recent times, the state has slowly regained the attention of agencies and donors, which are increasingly trying to involve state institutions in the delivery of developmental aid and in the implementation of developmental projects (Ellis and Biggs 2001).

Furthermore, concepts of good governance and citizenship have found new space in the development discourse, with developmental intervention focusing on the building of a trusting relationship between the state and its citizens besides more traditional fields. In this relationship, accountability represents a crucial element: in order to build that trusting relationship, power holders have to be answerable to and responsive towards the ones who are affected by that power; and the latter should play an active role in holding the former to account.

A study conducted by a research team of the Institute of Development Studies (henceforth IDS) of the University of Sussex (McGee and Gaventa 2011) reviewed the still-young research field of accountability and transparency initiatives. Although the impact of such initiatives as well as their correlation with improved development outputs has not been widely assessed, the IDS study outlines the emerging evidence of that impact and the need for further in depth research.

Although Helvetas Swiss Intercooperation<sup>1</sup> (henceforth HELVETAS) has always been attentive to the relationship between the state and its citizens, in recent years the organisation has been increasing its attention on issues of good governance and accountability, promoting specific projects in this field. The Governance and Peace team of HELVETAS's head office thus joined forces with IDS to undertake the present research study on HELVETAS-supported accountability initiatives. On the one hand HELVETAS is interested in deepening knowledge, both within the organisation and in the development community in general, about the functioning and impact of accountability initiatives. The increased learning should support HELVETAS in formulating its policies and implementing its projects in an innovative way based on knowledge and experience. On the other hand, the numerous HELVETAS accountability initiatives in various countries all around the world constitute a rich basis of experience and empirical data for academic researchers wanting to deepen knowledge about accountability.

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<sup>1</sup> Helvetas, the Swiss non-governmental organization for development and cooperation founded in 1955, is nowadays known as HELVETAS Swiss Intercooperation after merger with Intercooperation, another Swiss organization, in 2011. In this report, I refer in general to HELVETAS Swiss Intercooperation as HELVETAS. I use the former name Helvetas whenever I refer specifically to activities that took place before 2010.



The contexts in which HELVETAS projects are operating are often ‘fragile’ ones, namely contexts where the state institution is weak and faces problems of legitimacy and effectiveness<sup>2</sup>. The above-mentioned IDS study (McGee and Gaventa 2011) states that research on accountability initiatives has been conducted mostly in democratic environments and thus the present study aims at broadening the knowledge about such initiatives in *fragile* contexts. Three countries – Nepal, Mozambique and Bangladesh – have been selected among the countries where HELVETAS is working. The present report is the result of the research conducted in Nepal.

The investigation in Nepal is focused on the Public Audit Practice (PAP) as a relatively long-standing initiative whose primary aim is to promote HELVETAS’ downward accountability towards the community of beneficiaries. However, at the same time the initiative contributes to the empowerment of both citizens and state, to the diffusion of discourses on democracy and good governance and thus to the strengthening of public and social accountability. The research in Nepal aims at analysing the various factors that influence, positively or negatively, the success of the Public Audit Practice, as an example of an accountability initiative at local level.

### **1.1 Structure of the report**

After this introduction, the conceptual background of the study is presented in the following chapter, which discusses the very broad and often vague concepts that are central for the rest of the paper: accountability, participation and fragility. The characteristics of the Nepali context are presented in the third chapter, with a specific focus on the governance structure and on development interventions and HELVETAS’ engagement in the country. The same chapter describes the Public Audit Practice initiative and the Trail Bridge Support Unit, the project on which the research was implemented. The fourth chapter outlines the specific conceptual framework of the study and defines its research questions. The following chapter on methodology presents the general methodological approach of the study and describes the implementation of the research and of the methodological tools. The findings are illustrated in the sixth chapter. The last chapter, after the general conclusions of the study, proposes some recommendations for the planning and implementation of accountability initiatives and concludes the report by outlining some possible paths for further research.

## **2 Conceptual background**

This chapter introduces the central concepts underlying the present study (accountability, fragility and other related concepts like participation and power) and situates them in the broad academic as well as practitioner discourse.

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<sup>2</sup> See next chapter for a detailed definition of fragility and for the reasons behind choosing Nepal as an example of fragile country.

## 2.1 Accountability

With the paradigm shift in development thinking in the late 1980s and then more profoundly in the 1990s, concepts like bottom up development, participation, pro-poor growth, decentralisation and finally also accountability have spread in the development discourses (Ellis and Biggs 2001). Accountability is intended both as a goal *per se*, inasmuch as it is a crucial element of good governance; and as a means to improve aid effectiveness. However, in the last two decades the word accountability has been used so many times by so many different scholars and actors in the field and in so many different contexts that it has become 'a malleable and often nebulous concept, with connotations that change with the context and agenda' (Newell 2006:39). Thus, it is important firstly to sketch out the components of accountability, as they are presented in the academic and practitioner discourse, and secondly to find a working definition for the framework of this research project.

Accountability can be generally described as follows:

Broadly speaking, accountability refers to the process of holding actors responsible for their actions. More specifically, it is the concept that individuals, agencies and organisations (public, private and civil society) are held responsible for executing their powers according to a certain standard...  
(Tisné 2010 in McGee and Gaventa 2011:13)

In traditional definitions of accountability two elements are central: answerability, both the right for demanding and getting an answer and the duty to provide it, and enforceability, the system of sanctioning accountability failures (Newell and Wheeler 2006). Accountability is basically a relation between someone who holds any type of power and someone who is in any way affected by that power. Thus, accountability can assume myriad different aspects, depending on the kind of actors involved, the kind of power exercised and the kind of mechanisms activated. According to these differentiations, authors present numerous conceptualisations of subcategories of accountability. However, it is important to underline that one single type of accountability is rarely at work independently from the other types and that accountability practices do not follow a linear chronological process. Rather, the various manifestations of accountability relations should be understood as a 'cycle of negotiation and conflict', where different types of accountability strategies come into play in different moments (Newell and Wheeler 2006). The interplay of different accountability forms can lead to mutual strengthening or to new forms of hybrid accountability (Malena *et al.* 2004). The following paragraphs provide a selected overview of the main differentiations and categorisations of accountability (Newell and Bellour 2002; Newell 2006).

Whenever state actors and public resources are involved, 'public accountability' is the relevant term, referring to the relationship between the state (at its different levels) and its citizens. Some authors argue that accountability is what distinguishes an authoritarian regime from a democracy (Newell 2006); a government can be defined as accountable if it is responsive towards the electorate's preferences about its decisions and policies (Peruzzotti and Smulovitz 2006). Elections are the primary instrument of political accountability, in that they should guarantee some control over the behaviour of state actors; elections should act as a deterrent against misuse of power through fear of non (re)election. However, it is broadly attested that elections are not sufficient to guarantee the accountability of a government, since many ways can be found to bypass the actual electoral response, especially corruption and election manipulation among others (Malena *et al.* 2004). Thus, in a democratic system the 'vertical' mechanism of elections is accompanied by other 'horizontal' mechanisms of control, namely tools implemented within the state's institutional framework (Newell 2006; Peruzzotti and Smulovitz 2006). More generally, vertical accountability refers to the relationship between actors on different hierarchical levels (e.g. state–citizens, donor–

agency, agency–beneficiaries) while horizontal accountability takes place between actors on similar levels of a hierarchy, within one institution (e.g. a development agency), or between institutions within one institutional family (e.g. the judiciary and the executive within the state). Internal checks and balances are an example of horizontal accountability mechanisms (O'Donnell 2003).

A further differentiation can be made between the 'demand side' and the 'supply side' of the accountability relation (Malena *et al.* 2004). Supply side refers to formal power holders. Conversely, demand side refers to the actors who do not hold that power but who demand accountability and responsiveness from the actors who do. In the framework of political accountability demand side refers to the mechanisms through which citizens hold their government to account.

Among other types of accountability on the demand side is 'social accountability', i.e. all kinds of accountability mechanisms relying on the civic engagement of individual citizens, NGOs, social movements, civic associations, media and, in general, civil society actors (Peruzzotti and Smulovitz 2006). Traditional tools of social accountability are collective actions like public demonstrations, protests, advocacy campaigns, investigative journalism and public interest lawsuits (Malena *et al.* 2004). However, a new generation of tools has been developed in recent years, promoted mostly in the framework of participatory development intervention: participatory public policy making; participatory budgeting; citizen monitoring and evaluation of public service delivery; and public expenditure tracking and social auditing, among others (Malena *et al.* 2004). Malena *et al.* (2004:4) propose a categorisation of social accountability mechanisms based on five variables:

- (i) whether they are initiated by citizens or the state;<sup>3</sup>
- (ii) the extent to which they are 'institutionalised' vs. 'independent';
- (iii) the extent to which they are 'collaborative' vs. 'conflictive';
- (iv) whether they employ formal or informal sanctions;
- (v) whether they occur at the local, regional or national level.

Joshi and Houtzager (2012) criticise the 'messiness' (ibid. 8) of the use of the concept of social accountability by scholars and practitioners and propose the identification of key elements of social accountability as follows:

- requesting information;
- monitoring;
- making demands and demanding justification;
- invoking formal grievances procedures;
- holding demonstrations.

Moreover, drawing on Peruzzotti and Smulovitz (2006), the authors define the 'common core' of all social accountability actions: 'they are undertaken collectively through mobilising the grassroots; they involve making demands for information and failures of services 'public'; and expect to work through imposing political and reputational costs' (Joshi and Houtzager, 2012: 150).

Besides accountability of state to citizen, another discourse in the development field is on the accountability of development agencies. These agencies have been criticised for focusing too much on their own accountability to donors instead of beneficiaries (Newell and Bellour 2002; Newell 2006). In this framework the term 'downward accountability' is used to define

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<sup>3</sup> Some hold that other power holders can be as relevant as the state when discussing accountability relationships, e.g. private sector actors.

the accountability of agencies towards beneficiaries, in contrast to their accountability towards donors (HELVETAS Switzerland, n.d.b)<sup>4</sup>. In a broader sense, 'downward' refers to every kind of accountability relation from a powerful actor towards a less powerful one. The concept of accountability, as well as initiatives promoting accountability, has attracted growing interest among agencies and donors. As a response to the critique, initiatives have been launched to improve the downward accountability of agencies, for example by introducing auditing mechanisms in the project cycle.

At the same time, development agencies and donors have become increasingly interested in programmes that act on the relationship between the state and its citizens in order to promote and improve public accountability. The reasons for engaging in such initiatives vary among the various agencies; however, they mostly rely on a set of assumptions and hypothesis about the causal links between improved accountability and both improved good governance and intervention effectiveness (McGee and Gaventa 2011; specifically on social accountability Malena *et al.* 2004). Thus, besides being a goal and desirable *per se*, accountability is often pursued as a means to increase the effectiveness of aid or, generally, of service-delivery. Furthermore, promoting social accountability is seen as a means within a process of empowerment, a concept that like accountability has had increased diffusion in development discourse since the 1990s:

[b]y providing critical information on rights and entitlements and soliciting systematic feedback from poor people, social accountability mechanisms provide a means to increase and aggregate the voice of disadvantaged and vulnerable groups. This enhanced voice empowers the poor and increases the chance of greater responsiveness on the part of the state to their needs (Malena *et al.* 2004:5).

More generally, accountability initiatives (not only social accountability ones) are supposed to empower the actors with which they are engaging, whether civil society or state actors.

The IDS study (McGee and Gaventa 2011) highlights the limited empirical evidence of the described causal relations: in fact, as initiatives focusing specifically on accountability are very recent, the research field is very young. However, the IDS study suggests some emerging evidence of the impact of accountability and transparency initiatives: increased state or institutional responsiveness, lowering of corruption, building of new democratic spaces for citizen engagement, empowerment of local voices, improved budget utilisation and delivery of services (McGee and Gaventa 2011). The study also emphasises the need for further research on impact and effectiveness of accountability initiatives; a further IDS study (Joshi and Houtzager 2012) highlights also the need for further research on the contextual factors within which accountability initiatives can be successful. The present research project fits in this second research gap, inasmuch as it aims to analyse one specific accountability initiative in the context in which it is implemented and to point out how the various contextual factors affect the outcomes of the initiative.

## **2.2 Other central issues related to accountability**

In the present chapter I have pointed out some specific elements of the complex concept of accountability. The discourse and agenda on accountability, being so broad, are linked with many other discourses and agendas: governance and democracy, poverty reduction, gender equality, civil society empowerment, transparency and corruption, rights-based approaches to development, decentralisation and participation, among others (Malena *et al.* 2004).

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<sup>4</sup> While HELVETAS uses 'downward accountability', others use 'aid accountability'.

The discourse on participation is crucial for the framework of this study. Indeed, participation is directly linked to social accountability inasmuch as it is what distinguishes social accountability from more conventional forms of accountability (Malena *et al.* 2004). Since the 1990s with the diffusion of Participatory Rural Appraisal techniques (Chambers 1992; Chambers 1994) participation has become a central concept in the development discourse. However, the participatory approach has faced fundamental criticisms (Cooke and Kothari 2001; Hickey and Mohan 2004a; Korf 2010). The participatory approach promoted by Chambers and broadly implemented in the development practice was critiqued for presenting itself as beyond politics, or as 'post-political' (Korf 2010). It is claimed that traditional participatory approaches in development projects are applied as if free of political involvement. As a consequence, the role of power relations in participatory spaces is mostly ignored under the assumption that those spaces are not 'contaminated' by politics. The criticism of traditional forms of participation emphasises that participatory spaces are a field where different actors meet and handle their own interests and that these spaces are themselves shaped by relations of power. Consequently, power comes to be a central issue. Promoting participation without taking into consideration existing power relationships may lead to strengthen those relationships, without bringing a radical social change. Therefore, in recent years the concept of 'transformational' participation has found large diffusion in academic as well as in practitioner discourses (Hickey and Mohan 2004). This concept underlines the need for including power analysis in participatory intervention (Gaventa 2004). The 'political economy of participation' assumes that each intervention (i.e. each new participatory space) is inserted in a context of power relations and that, indeed, such new spaces represent for actors new means to accumulate political and economic power (Hickey and Mohan 2004b).

These critical points fit in the stream of the deconstructivist critique to development: from the approach of radical deconstructivists like Escobar (Escobar 1995) to other more moderate approaches like the ones of Long (1992) and Olivier De Sardan (2005), this stream challenges the very notion of development, by arguing that the concept itself is nothing but a construction, i.e. the result of historical and cultural processes of attribution of meanings which are strongly driven by power relations. Thus, the concept of 'intervention' comes to mean 'an ongoing, socially constructed and negotiated process, not simply the execution of an already-specified plan of action with expected outcomes' (Long 1992:35). Long and Olivier De Sardan propose approaches to, respectively, sociology and anthropology of development which focus analysis on actors and on their 'encounters' in an 'arena' – i.e. a 'political field' of power struggles where values, meanings, resources and relationships are negotiated between the actors (Long 1992; Olivier De Sardan 2005). In this framework, development intervention is no longer seen as a circumscribed autonomous field, but it is analysed in its position within the local *arena*. In fact, the intervention itself becomes a strategic weapon that can be used in the arena to defend one's own interests in personal power struggles (Long 1992).

Therefore, in my analysis I consider the way in which local arenas are shaped by development interventions. Participatory interventions create new *spaces of participation* (Cornwall and Coelho 2007a; Cornwall and Coelho 2007b). Following Olivier De Sardan's approach, these spaces should be seen not as autonomous 'boxes', but rather as occurrences within the unique local arena. These 'new spaces' represent a new opportunity for a meeting between state and civil society: in the encounter, new boundaries are traced between the two entities. The *actors* themselves are defined and constructed in the confrontation with each other (Long 1992:25). Thus, such new spaces become the very central point for an analysis of development intervention.

Cornwall and Coelho (2007a) point out some characteristics of and problems linked to spaces of participation. Although in principle everybody is invited to participate, in fact only a selected part of the population really does *participate*. Consequently, issues of inclusion,

representativeness and legitimacy arise: who really participates and with what legitimacy to represent the broader population? Participation in such spaces, claiming to be open for everyone without discrimination, is not regulated by elections. Thus, the legitimacy of participants to represent the broader population may be questioned. Researchers often highlight the risk of existing elites monopolising participatory spaces and capturing the 'development rent'. Olivier De Sardan defines development aid 'as a "rent" [... that] is based on the mobilisation of external resources [i.e. international development funds]' (Olivier De Sardan 2005:173). Although the French anthropologist defines development rent in a strict monetary sense, following his further and broader argumentation I prefer to understand the *rent* as a more complex concept, consisting also of non-monetary benefits like reputation, prestige, social networks and finally power (Olivier De Sardan 2005:149).

Often only local elites can actually participate, namely people who are already empowered in the community (Olivier De Sardan 2005; Gaventa 2006; Cornwall and Coelho 2007b). By controlling the participatory spaces, elites may gain more power and promote their own interests; that is, profit from the development rent. Gaventa (2006, 2004) proposes a useful differentiation of power forms in the context of participatory development. He distinguishes between visible, hidden and invisible power: the less visible the power, the more difficult it is to challenge and transform it. Visible power concerns those explicit structures of decision making (rules, regulations, acts) that set the formal framework by defining who, how and what can decide. In such formal structures there is room for manoeuvre for exercising hidden power in setting the agenda and deciding which issues should be discussed and which should not. Even more subtly, invisible power is rooted more strongly in the cultural and social context: it concerns the construction of meanings, values, representations and how people think about the world in which they are living. Invisible power can lead to intimidation and self-censorship. Thus, in order both to avoid reproducing existing harmful power relations and to strengthen positive power occurrences, it is crucial to analyse in depth all kinds of power relations.

Furthermore, since new participatory spaces are constructed as all social spaces are, it is important to analyse how the boundaries of such spaces are shaped and by whom: 'who is inviting participation and who is taking part, and what they think participation is about or for' (Cornwall 2002:10). Gaventa (2006, 2004; Gaventa and Cornwall 2002) suggests a differentiation based on who creates the spaces and to whom they are open. He distinguishes between closed, invited and claimed spaces: the first are created by power holders and closed to the broader population; the second are created by 'various kind of authorities' that invite the broader population freely to participate; the third are created from active bottom up mobilisation and requests by 'less powerful actors' (Gaventa 2006:26-27).

### **2.3 About fragility**

Like accountability, 'fragility' is a word that is broadly used in academic and practitioner works but whose definition is everything but univocal (Grävingholt *et al.* 2012). Indeed, fragility is mostly interpreted as both a cause and a consequence of violent conflicts, in a process in which the former strengthens the latter and *vice versa* (Fabra Mata and Ziaja 2009). Many attempts have been made to find meaningful indicators and a way of measuring fragility, but the concept is so broad and complex that all indicators can describe just a small part of the phenomenon (Fabra Mata and Ziaja 2009).

In the new millennium, fragility has become a central issue within the international cooperation world and agencies have been questioning firstly what fragility means and secondly what the role of development agencies can be in a fragile context. Consequently, each agency developed its own definition of fragility (Fabra Mata and Ziaja 2009). HELVETAS's definition of fragility is the following:

Weak institutional capacity and lack of accountability as well as legitimacy and missing monopoly of force by the state increase the risk of violence. Under such circumstances, governments are often seen as perpetrators or absent actors, making way for greed or grievances from various population groups and elites in the society. In the long run, these grievances add to the risk of political instability and violent conflict.

(Fabra Mata and Ziaja 2009; OECD 2007)

Although there is no agreement about the exact definition and measurement of fragility, academic researchers and practitioners agree on its multidimensionality. Basically, beyond differences in terminology and detailed definitions, fragility is characterised by three dimensions (Fabra Mata and Ziaja 2009:6):

- *Effectiveness* (or *capacity*) refers to the capacity of the state to deliver basic services and guarantee economic and social welfare to its citizens. This capacity depends heavily on the economic situation of the country. Part of this dimension is also the matter of social inclusion: ethnicity, caste, gender and other kinds of discrimination in service delivery and in welfare distribution are factors that can lead to instability and can therefore be used as indicators of fragility.
- *Authority* refers to the ability of the state to enforce its monopoly on the legitimate use of force and to ensure security. Consequently, both violent conflicts and high criminality rates can be read as signs of fragility.
- *Legitimacy* refers to the acceptance of the state by its people in a non-coerced way and the capacity of the state to effectively represent its citizens.

Nepal is taken to be a 'fragile country' in the present study and, indeed, it is an often-cited example of 'fragility' (Stewart and Brown 2009; DFID 2010). The main and more obvious reason to define Nepal as a fragile context has been the civil war started by the Maoists in 1996. They demanded, among other things, the secularisation of the Hindu-based state and the abolition of the monarchy, which had been ruling the country since unification in 1769 (Whelpton 2005). In 2006 the second People's Movement, which saw a temporary coalition of the main parties and Maoist rebels, led to the signing of a Peace Agreement, which finally ended the civil war, restoring the Prime Minister and the Parliament and proclaiming Nepal as a secular country. After the Peace Agreement a Constituent Assembly was elected in 2008, whose first act was the declaration of Nepal as a Federal Democratic Republic (Srivastava and Sharma 2010). However, since 2006 Nepal has still been considered a fragile country: the main characteristic of its fragility, now, lies in the situation of transition and in the difficult state-building process which has not yet been able to provide the country with a stable form of government and a stable state structure (Stewart and Brown 2009; DFID 2010). The Constituent Assembly elected in 2008 failed to accomplish its duty: after four years of shifting deadlines for the draft of the new constitution, on 27 May 2012 the Assembly was dissolved, thereby leaving the country in a situation of high uncertainty (Parajuli 2012). Thus, Nepal is now facing important challenges in all three fragility dimensions defined above.

First, the effectiveness of state service delivery is still low: Nepal ranks below the 100th place in the classification of 192 countries according to GDP and a quarter of Nepalis still live under the national poverty line, although the percentage has rapidly decreased in the last decade. National development strongly depends on foreign aid and the ratio of total debt to GDP is more than 20 per cent. Moreover, economic and social exclusion and discrimination based

on caste, ethnicity and gender are very prominent<sup>5</sup>. While the poverty rate has decreased, the Gini Index measuring the inequality in income distribution has increased (World Bank 2012).

Second, regarding authority, violence in the country has decreased markedly after 2006 and occurrences of extreme violence have become less frequent. However, massive demonstrations, strikes, *bandhs* (general strikes) and other popular forms of protest very often set the country in a situation of blockage and chaos and generate a sense of instability and insecurity. The justice system is not effective: processes are lengthy and often delayed; and impunity both for the crimes committed during the conflict and for more recent crimes of corruption is widespread, undermining the trust of people in the justice system (Amnesty International 2012).

Third, legitimacy is today the most challenging issue in the 'fragility' of Nepal. Nepalis have learned from history not to trust people who are in power (Whelpton 2005; Srivastava and Sharma 2010). Before the advent of democracy, continuous power struggles led the two main dynasties ruling the Kingdom to open and violent confrontations as well as to more sly machinations and opportunistic alliances with powerful neighbours (China and India with its British coloniser). The ten years of democratic experiment in the 1950s, when the first political parties were founded and the King shared the power with the Parliament, were characterised by inter- and intraparty conflicts, ever-changing alliances and fragmentations, and were ended by the royal takeover in 1960 with the consequent ban of political parties. The same pattern was reproduced thirty years later, after three decades of the royal-imposed party-less *panchayat* system, a system of directly and indirectly elected representatives that had little room for manoeuvre under the power of the King. The Panchayat banned political parties and strongly repressed democratic movements, in particular at the end of the 1970s. The democratic achievements of the first People's Movement in the 1990s were again dismantled by the royal takeover in 2005. The decade following this second democratic experiment was characterised by frequent government changes, driven by individual greed and power struggles and resulting in the incapacity to build a legitimate government. This was also one reason (and at the same time a consequence) of the Maoist insurgency at the turn of the century. Thus, popular expectations and hopes of democracy were miserably disappointed over the years, prejudicing the confidence of citizens in state institutions. Today, the long (and lengthened) process to the new constitution and the continuous conflicts between and within parties do not help Nepalis to find reasons to trust people in power.

Definitions and descriptions of fragility are very often focused on macro phenomena. The same focus was set in the preceding paragraphs, which described the macro characteristics that still make of Nepal a fragile country and for which Nepal has been chosen for this study. However, we are interested in observing the particularities of fragility at the local level, especially its effects on accountability. We want to analyse which elements of fragility can be found by looking at the micro level, and what are the 'micro consequences' of 'macro fragility'.

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<sup>5</sup> Such differentiations are exacerbated by the very high diversity characterising the country: beside the traditional Hinduistic differentiation in castes, Nepal counts an important number of ethnic groups, most of which have a very strong cultural tradition and after 2006 are fighting for the recognition of their autonomy (Pradhan 2002).



# 3 Context

## 3.1 Governance structure in Nepal

The current local governance structure was defined in 1990, when the whole organisation of the country was reviewed after thirty years of the party-less *panchayat* system and the first local elections took place. The new structure was fixed in the 1999 Local Self-Governance Act or LGSA (GoN 1999a) and 1999 Local Self-Governance Regulation (GoN 1999b), which mandate the devolution of powers from the central government to the local authorities and define the rights and responsibilities of the various bodies at the different levels (see Annex II).

As a consequence of the LSGA, in the last decade resources were increasingly channelled to the local bodies. Thus, local bodies face a big challenge: suddenly they have at their disposal far more resources than before, but staff, capacities and knowledge have not increased proportionally. The consequence is low efficiency (and effectiveness) in the allocation of resources. Moreover, these settings create a very high risk of corruption: the resources are many, but the mechanisms to allocate them and control their allocation are still not well developed.

In 2002 the local elected representatives were dismissed by the central government and replaced by centrally appointed officials: during the following four years political parties did not have formal power at local level. In 2006 the All-Party Mechanism (APM) was introduced: the executive bodies were formed of unelected people's representatives directly appointed by the parties (one representative for each party active in the area) (Acharya 2011). At the beginning of 2012 the APM was dismantled by the Commission for the Investigation of Abuse of Authority (CIAA): the decision was motivated by the high risk of corruption (Kathmandu Metro 2012). As a consequence, the entire (formal) power structure was shifted to the bureaucracy, i.e. to centrally appointed officials, technicians and bureaucrats. Today the (formally) most powerful figures in the local administration are the Local Development Officer (LDO) at DDC level and the Village Development Committee (VDC) Secretary at village level. Thus, at the time of writing, again, political parties have no formal power at local level. However, political leaders still have varying levels of influence in the planning and execution processes at VDC and District Development Committee (DDC) level.

Although the LSGA sets the steps for a decentralisation process, local bodies are still under the strict control of the central government. Moreover, the LSGA itself does not speak of local *government* but only of local *bodies* or *authorities*: the real autonomy of these institutions has still to be recognised and is a main issue in the discussion regarding the new constitution.

The critical situation of these local bodies has been recognised by the central government, which (together with international donors) launched in 2008 the very ambitious Local Governance and Community Development Programme (GoN 2008). The programme aims at strengthening the local level both on the side of local bodies and of citizens. Local bodies should be supported by developing and increasing their capacities and citizens should be empowered for active engagement in decision making at the local level. A main component of the programme is the concept of 'transformational social mobilisation' in opposition to 'transactional social mobilisation' (GoN 2009). With a transactional approach (GoN 2009), social mobilisation does not aim at challenging existing power structures from the ground up but aims at mobilising the community in order to make more effective the allocation of resources or the service delivery. In contrast, in the transformational approach applied by the LGCDP (GoN 2009), social mobilisation aims at transforming the existing power structures by empowering marginalised groups, thereby giving them the chance to actively participate to

the decision-making process. The programme represents an important step in the process of building strong, stable and accountable local institutions.

## **3.2 HELVETAS work in the country**

### **3.2.1 The Public Audit Practice**

In the 1950s the government of Nepal started to open the country to international aid and cooperation. Nowadays the development scenario in Nepal is characterised by a multitude of international organisations engaging in the country. In 2010 international aid flows to Nepal represented more than 5 per cent of the gross national income, at more than 800 million US dollars (OECD 2012). The engagement of HELVETAS in the country, which started in the mid-1950s, has undergone many changes, reflecting both the changes in the national context and in international approaches to development (HELVETAS Nepal 2006a). At the beginning, the organisation was working almost entirely with the central government. In the following years the focus of not only HELVETAS, but development agencies overall, shifted increasingly to the local population and civil society. Since the 1980s HELVETAS' attention has shifted to local bodies as very important actors in local development: a new range of interventions was then focused on supporting local bodies to fulfil their tasks (e.g. support of participatory planning practices). During the insurgency Maoists challenged the position of local authorities: working with local bodies in areas controlled by Maoists was risky and even life threatening for development workers. Thus, matters of downward accountability and aid transparency became crucial in order to guarantee the continuation of the engagement. Most agencies developed stricter governance and transparency guidelines and downward accountability tools (Singh and Ingdal 2007). It was also during that time, precisely in 2004, that the Public Audit Practice found its general application in HELVETAS' interventions in the whole country. The history of HELVETAS' Public Audit Practice in Nepal (HELVETAS Nepal 2004) began in the 1980s with the first attempts and experimentation with public gatherings at community level. The practice was consolidated during the 1990s in the two biggest infrastructure projects (water management and trail bridges) and subsequently applied in all projects. Nowadays, HELVETAS Nepal has a specific working area (Governance and Peace) working with crosscutting issues of governance (i.e. participation, transparency, accountability, etc.), which is responsible for the overall implementation of the PAP. The originality and effectiveness of HELVETAS' PAP were recently recognised with the ALIne award.<sup>6</sup>

Basically, PAP is a tool for improving the downward accountability of the agency. PAP consists of three steps: Public Hearing (PH), Public Review (PR) and Public Audit (PA), during which information about the project is shared and decisions are taken with the beneficiaries (for a detailed description see Annex III). Depending on distinctive features of the different projects, the three gatherings can be organised and facilitated by HELVETAS local staff, by the local service provider (LSP) or by the user committee. In principle, all stakeholders are invited to participate (and the participation of some of them is compulsory): HELVETAS staff, LSP, user committee, beneficiaries, local government officials, political parties representatives, media and of course the whole community benefitting.

The first reason for conducting a PAP is the enhancement of aid transparency and accountability (see McGee and Gaventa 2011) and in general of downward accountability. It should enhance credibility as well as the legitimacy and acceptance of the project by the community. This is the second reason behind PAP: to involve the community at every step of every project and to provide stakeholders with a space to express their opinions, criticism and suggestions. As a third motivation, HELVETAS' PAP issue sheet states that '... the actual goal is to sensitise beneficiaries and build democratic practices from the bottom.

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<sup>6</sup> See [www.aline.org.uk/whatwedo/researchandevaluation/alinefarmervoiceawards](http://www.aline.org.uk/whatwedo/researchandevaluation/alinefarmervoiceawards) (accessed 24.07.12).

People are empowered to demand accountability' (HELVETAS Switzerland, n.d.a). Moreover, '[t]he PAP raises awareness among the people on their right to information and on the duty of the power-holders to be accountable to them. People are empowered to claim transparency and accountability from other donors / INGOs as well as from the government' (HELVETAS Switzerland, n.d.a). This third reason represents a secondary (and mostly indirect) output of the PAP and is the focus of our research. Of course, PAP aims also at development effectiveness objectives, but only in an indirect and secondary way (see McGee and Gaventa 2011).

### **3.2.2 The Trail Bridge Support Unit**

Nepal's amazing landscape, with its high mountains and steep valleys, but also with its flatland in the South divided by numerous big rivers, represents a challenge for the development of transport and of the country's economy. The road network has developed in recent decades, but most of Nepal is still cut off from the transport circuit and is very difficult to access. Trail bridges are an effective tool to improve the connection of remote regions to the transport network: nearly 4,500 trail bridges are already present on the territory, but further potential demand for an additional 6,000 bridges is estimated (HELVETAS Nepal 2010).

At the beginning of its engagement in trail bridge construction in Nepal in the early 1960s, HELVETAS was working directly with communities without involving the central government, which had its own centralised bridge building programme (HELVETAS Nepal 2006b; see also Annex IV for a detailed description of today's trail bridge construction process). In the early 1990s the central government started to decentralise smaller tasks on the district level. However, it was in the mid-1990s that the decentralising strategy gained more importance with responsibility for building competencies shifting to the local level. Since 2009, the construction of trail bridges in the whole country is managed by the Department of Local Infrastructure Development and Agriculture Roads (DoLIDAR) of the Government of Nepal through a Sector Wide Approach (SWAp): the trail bridge section (now Local Bridge Section) of DoLIDAR coordinates and monitors the whole bridge construction programme in Nepal. Aid funds from donors (including the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation, SDC) for trail bridges are channelled into the specific basket managed by the Department and are then handled as state resources. The aim of using a Sector Wide Approach is to harmonise the landscape of trail bridge construction, which was (and is) populated by many donors and organisations and which should be coordinated with broader governmental infrastructure plans. The Trail Bridge Support Unit (TBSU), HELVETAS's section responsible for implementing SDC's programme for trail bridge construction in Nepal, supports the governmental sector with technical assistance (quality assurance and capacity building of stakeholders among others). The guidelines for PAP implementation were integrated in the new governmental sector: PAP is now implemented for every trail bridge built in the country. Hence, besides being a downward accountability tool for HELVETAS Nepal, in the case of trail bridges PAP has come to be at the same time a social accountability tool that demands that local authorities (DDC, rather than VDC) account for the proper use and effectiveness of public resources and a public accountability tool for local authorities to implement transparency on public resources use. Thus, TBSU's PAP becomes of particular interest for this study, inasmuch as, contrarily to other HELVETAS projects implementing PAP, it represents a form of public transparency and accountability initiative activated by social accountability efforts, rather than only a form of downward accountability by an aid agency to its beneficiary or target populations.

## 4 Conceptual framework and research questions

For the reasons already stated in the Introduction and Conceptual background, the leading research question for this study is: which practices and factors contribute to the success of accountability initiatives in fragile contexts? As already mentioned, this project fits in the research gap pointed out by Joshi and Houtzager (2012) on the contextual factors that affect the outcomes of accountability initiatives.<sup>7</sup> It is important to emphasise once again that this study does not aim to assess the success of such initiatives, but to analyse the contextual factors that influence the implementation of such initiatives.

More specifically, the focus lies on the relationship between the state and its citizens and on the specific accountability mechanisms activated on both supply side and demand side of that relationship. The aim is to understand under what local circumstances or conditions local authorities are willing to be accountable to citizens in challenging environments and under what conditions interventions succeed at improving the accountability of local government towards their citizens in those particular cases. Particular attention is paid to the role citizens play in demanding or promoting accountability and on the obstacles they face to exercise voice. We<sup>8</sup> are also interested in ascertaining what conditions seem to be generally conducive across all cases, although we are aware of the limited generalisation potential of the qualitative case study approach chosen for the research project (see next chapter, Methodology).

We first developed leading working definitions for accountability and social accountability according to the sketched conceptual background. Thus, accountability is the obligation of power holders to take responsibility and to be answerable and liable with regard to their actions and choices. Social accountability is an approach towards building accountability that relies on civic engagement, in which ordinary citizens and/or civil society organisations participate directly or indirectly in exacting accountability. Mechanisms of social accountability can be initiated and supported by the state, citizens, or both, but often are demand driven and operate from the bottom up. I assumed that accountability shapes state–citizens relations through various mechanisms and I identified some core issues as part of accountability practices. Each of these can be seen at the same time from the supply side and from the demand side of the relation:

- *Voice*. How people exercise their voice; how the state listens to that voice and is answerable to it.
- *Information*. How people ask for information; what kind of transparency is provided by the state and how the state is answerable to the requests of the people.
- *Decision-making*. How people participate to the decision-making process; how choices regarding its citizens are taken by the state.
- *Service delivery*. How people monitor the actions of the state; how the state gives people the means to monitor its actions.

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<sup>7</sup> For some literature specifically about accountability in Nepal see e.g. Hamal & Sigdel (2012), The Carter Center (2011) and Jha *et al.* (2009); Tamang and Malena (2011) provide a broad overview of contextual factors influencing social accountability in Nepal and represent thus an important basis for the further observations.

<sup>8</sup> I use the plural form whenever I refer to the research team of the overall study or to the country team for Nepal; the teams' composition and responsibilities are described in the next chapter. I use the singular form whenever I refer to myself as the person who assumes the responsibility for a part of the research design, for data analysis and for writing the present report.

- *Incentives/sanctions.* What incentives and sanctions are provided to people to participate; what sanction mechanisms are available if state accountability fails, and what incentives are provided to promote accountability.

I assumed a fundamental distinction between legal and institutional settings on one hand (i.e. what is stated *on paper*) and the practical implementation of such settings on the other one (i.e. what is really happening). The study also pays attention to the way in which different accountability forms and initiatives are interacting and thereby strengthening (or hampering) each other and what kind of innovative or informal mechanisms can be observed.

For the analysis I assumed a post-structuralist and social constructivist attitude and drew on the actor-oriented approaches suggested by Long (1992) and Olivier De Sardan (2005). Although the analysis does not completely adhere to the procedures proposed by the two authors, I followed them by looking at the behaviour of the various actors, asking what interests, motivations, constraints, struggles and strategies shape their decisions. The actors, of course, are observed in their social context, namely in their behaviour within the local social arena. While looking at the arena, the main questions are about power, i.e. what kind of power is mobilised by the different actors, why and with which consequences. I also analysed how actors construct, through negotiation, themselves and the sense of the different issues handled in the arena. Finally, in the whole analysis I paid particular attention to the context in which actors are included, thereby observing at the same time how the context influences the behaviour of actors and how the latter shapes the former.

We focused our field research on one specific intervention promoting accountability (the Public Audit Practice) within one specific project of HELVETAS Nepal (the Trail Bridge Support Unit). As showed in the previous chapter, the PAP is originally a tool of downward accountability, i.e. of accountability from HELVETAS towards its beneficiaries. However, the framework of TBSU's PAP fits the research objectives very well inasmuch as it involves various kinds of actors: from the state (at all levels), from the civil society (user committee, beneficiaries, local service provider a local NGO, HELVETAS an INGO<sup>9</sup>) and from the private sector ('fabricators'<sup>10</sup>). All these actors are invited to participate in a *new participatory space* created expressly for the project. Since the state is a main actor in the trail bridge construction, TBSU's PAP is a tool not only for HELVETAS' downward accountability, but also for public accountability of the state (mostly local authorities) towards its citizens. Moreover, the PAP embodies the characteristics of social accountability tools described above, since it relies on the mobilisation of civil society actors in order to monitor the behaviour of state actors and (I)NGOs. Also practical reasons led to the decision to focus on this specific project. The TBSU is the largest project of HELVETAS in Nepal and the only one that allowed us to attend the three steps of PAP (PH, PR and PA) in only three months of field research. Moreover, the TBSU is one of the projects with the longest experience in the implementation of PAP.

We therefore chose TBSU's PAP as a privileged field where the behaviour and the interaction of actors can be observed and analysed. By looking at the specific space created through the intervention, we aimed to identify and understand the strategies that motivate the behaviour of the various actors, as well as the contextual variables that facilitate or obstruct the success of the specific accountability initiative. Beside the general questions listed above, I also observed the participatory space of the intervention relying on the framework proposed by Gaventa (2006) and Cornwall and Coelho (2007) sketched above, and asking in what way that space is constructed and how the various actors shape that space. Moreover, particular

<sup>9</sup> In this report I refer to (I)NGOs as civil society actors, but I am aware that they present many characteristics of private sector actors (see also *The role of CBOs and NGOs in the Findings*).

<sup>10</sup> 'Fabricator', though not common in British English, is the term used in the framework of TBSU to designate the (private) supplier of specific technical material that cannot be found/produced within the community.

attention is paid to the different forms of power (visible, hidden, and invisible) and how they shape the space and the behaviour of actors.

## 5 Methodology

### 5.1 Methodological approach

A qualitative, inductive, case study approach has been chosen for the research project. The study of course relies on the existing literature, but, since the field we want to explore is very young, we do not formulate hypothesis in advance that should be demonstrated with the research nor do we aim at an impact assessment or at the measuring of the degree of correlation between different factors. Rather, the observation is open to new and unexpected correlations and connections, which is possible through inductive and qualitative research (Kruker Meier and Rauh 2005). The approach for the Nepali case study is fundamentally based on post-structuralist and social constructivist theories: it is assumed that reality is *socially constructed* through routine and social interaction and is shaped by power relations (Kruker Meier and Rauh 2005).

However, the research project also has a more practice-oriented objective, i.e. to understand the context and the implementation of HELVETAS interventions in a way that is helpful for future practice. Hence, the study is also applied research, which requires a certain degree of generalisation of the findings. Although we are not looking for statistically representative data and although we are aware of the limited generalising potential of qualitative case study research, we try to consider whether some findings might be generalised beyond the case study. This should be possible also with the comparison of the three case studies in the three selected countries. However, this is not a comparative study in a strict sense: no common specific research design has been established, but each team adapted the design and the focus to the peculiarities of each specific context.

In a purely qualitative approach, quality, objectivity and reliability of data can be guaranteed through different methods, among which triangulation is one of the most used (Kruker Meier and Rauh 2005; Mikkelsen 2005). Data were triangulated in different ways (see Mikkelsen 2005:196-7). First, different collection *methods* were used, by integrating more traditional interviews with participatory tools and participatory observation. Second, we differentiated our sample and collected the data in different locations and in different moments of the trail bridge construction process (*data triangulation*). Third, the composition of the Nepali research team (see below) allowed a very broad *investigator triangulation*, with constant exchanges between the three members, each of whom had a very different background. Moreover, a *communicative validation* was applied (Mikkelsen 2005), mostly with HELVETAS staff and local NGOs, by discussing impressions and analysis with them during expert interviews, informal conversations and feedback meetings.

A sensible choice of the sample is also a way to guarantee validity and reliability of data: moreover, the capacity of data to cover the broadest range of correlations and phenomena and to *represent* (in the sense of *representation* and not of *representativeness*) the investigated reality depends on the sample (Kruker Meier and Rauh 2005; Mikkelsen 2005). We used a partially structured and stratified sampling, but we left space in the field for random sampling and chain sampling. The structuring of the sampling was based on the role of actors as regards the trail bridge project: the actors were divided in two categories, namely the *actively involved actors* and the *not actively involved actors*. The first are actors who have an active role and active responsibilities in the trail bridge construction: DDC and VDC officers, TBSU, LSP, user committee and to some extent political parties. The second are people who are touched by the project to the extent that they are beneficiaries of the trail

bridge, but who are not actively involved in the organisation of the project (except for the practical community work at the bridge site): these are villagers of all kinds, local NGOs or CBOs working in other projects, media, political parties. Especially in the category 'villagers', it was important to consider the stratification of the sample, which was based on traditional variables of caste/ethnicity, gender, economic status, education, age, profession, geographical location within the village. Although no systematic stratification was applied, we tried to cover the broadest range of different variables in the interviews and interactions in the field.

## **5.2 Research process and implementation of methodological tools**

This study was initiated by the HELVETAS Head office with the involvement of a senior researcher of the Institute of Development Studies of the University of Sussex for academic support. The team for Nepal was comprised of the Programme Coordinator for the Governance and Peace working area of HELVETAS Nepal, a Nepali student (Kathmandu University) and myself as young Swiss researcher (University of Zurich). Each of the three members brought into the team his/her own perspective, which diversity made the strength of the team. The Programme Coordinator brought his long experience as practitioner in the development field in the country; the Nepali student brought the academic perspective from inside the country and the Swiss student the academic perspective from outside the continent. The composition of the research team of course influenced the research implementation, in particular the interaction with the actors. The Programme Coordinator's involvement in the research project and his presence at some interviews and meetings might have created different reactions from the interlocutors regarding his position in three ways. First, a sense of subjection by a person holding an important position in an important development agency could have led the interlocutors to 'adorn' their answers in order to show him the quality of their work. Second, the presence of an important person of an agency could have created expectations about future projects or funding by that agency. Third, the presence of the Programme Coordinator with his inside experience allowed interviewees to introduce more complex and 'insider' issues, which were introduced less often while speaking only with external people (i.e. the two students). On the other hand, the young age and the female gender of the two students had an 'easing' effect on the interviewees. We did not feel either age or gender discrimination in the interaction with our interlocutors. Nevertheless, the socio-economic provenance of the two students (high caste, urban, one educated and the other from a highly developed country) created in some cases a sense of envy in the interlocutors in the villages. More generally, beyond the individuality of the researchers, the framework of the study itself had an influence on the interlocutors and their answers. Although we repeatedly explained that our aim was not an impact assessment or an evaluation of the project or the project's collaborators, we felt that our interlocutors still perceived it as an evaluation of their work. Therefore, their answers were sometime biased and 'built' to present their work in a beautified way. We also felt sometimes a 'defensive' reaction from our interlocutors to observations from our side that pointed out problematic issues.

The actual implementation of the research started with a first phase of primary and secondary literature review, conducted by the author of this report in Zurich. After that, three months of field research in Nepal, between February and April 2012, represented the main data collection phase. Part of the time was spent at HELVETAS central office in Patan, a town close to the capital Kathmandu. During the first days in Patan the team could meet the TBSU staff, in order to include its preferences and needs in the research design as well as to organise the actual field work in the bridge locations.

The data collection in Nepal happened on two different levels. On the one hand the team conducted expert interviews (Kruker Meier and Rauh 2005) in Patan and in Surkhet District

capital with HELVETAS staff and with collaborators of other agencies dealing with accountability issues in Nepal. The aim of the interviews with HELVETAS staff was to explore their experience with PAP applied to projects different than TBSU. We met other agencies, as well, in order to collect ideas and experiences about other ways of dealing with accountability questions in the country. The approach to the meetings with experts, both inside and outside HELVETAS, is the semi-structured and semi-standardised interview with a high degree of freedom for the interviewee to bring into the discussion new issues and also for the interviewer to follow and deepen the ways showed by the interviewee. By creating the environment of a less formal and less structured interview we aimed at exploring in the broadest way possible the experience of the interviewees (Kruker Meier and Rauh 2005). All expert interviews were held in English and without recording. The composition of the interviewers' team varied from one to three persons, with my presence as constant in all interviews. We conducted over ten expert interviews, in addition to some meetings with TBSU staff.

On the other hand the team visited three bridge locations in order to gain local firsthand knowledge. The criterion for the selection of the villages was merely pragmatic: they were selected in order to allow the team to attend one public hearing, one public review and one public audit. The access to the field was organised by the Programme Coordinator and guaranteed by the contact with local TBSU staff and LSP (see *Annex I*).

For the actual research on the field, we conducted first of all participant observation (Silverman 2010), which was not limited to the observation of the public meetings of the PAP, but was applied also to other kinds of public meetings (i.e. CBOs' meetings), to a Demonstration Model Bridge Training (the workshop where user committee members from various bridge sites are taught about the technicalities of the bridge building as well as about health and governance issues) and to the everyday life in the village in general. Living with villagers allowed us to share with the families and with local people their everyday life and to observe the everyday relationships, power structures, habits and struggles taking place in the village. The aim of observing the public meetings as part of the PAP was first of all to analyse the implementation of such practices in the concrete praxis: we focused our attention on the kind of topics discussed in the meetings as well as on the group dynamics taking place in such occasions. The same focus was set while observing meetings of other CBOs during which we also tried to identify what other kind of accountability mechanisms were being implemented. We attended about ten such meetings, taking advantage of the occasion also to informally interact with the members.

The main 'active' method used during the field research was the semi-structured and semi-standardised interview (Mikkelsen 2005; Silverman 2010). We developed two different checklists for the interviews. The first used for actors actively involved in the project (see above) was focused on the specific role of the interviewee in the bridge construction and his/her interaction with other actors. The second checklist was used for actors not actively involved in the project (see above) and was focused on the knowledge of the interviewee about the trail bridge project as well as on his/her broader relation with, and perception of, the state (i.e. the local authorities). The interviews were held mostly individually, but we used roughly the same checklists for group interviews (Mikkelsen 2005). The first type of checklist was followed more strictly during the interviews. With the second type of checklist we let the interviews develop more freely, allowing interviewees to deviate more strongly from the main topics. This allowed us to be very open to new issues and themes that represent a priority for local people. In total we held over fifty formal interviews (first and second checklist type) in the field, in which user committee members were the most represented, five group discussions with the community (second checklist type) and about thirty less formal interviews with residents (second checklist type).



In order to explore the field and later to complete the information gathered during the interviews, we used also Participatory Rural Appraisal (PRA) tools (Mikkelsen 2005). Specifically, we conducted five actor mappings and social mappings of the project and of the community. These tools were used exclusively with people actively involved in the project (LSP and TBSU staff, user committee members). With these tools we gained an overview about the social and spatial organisation of the project as well as of the community. In particular, actor mappings allowed us not only to identify the actors we would later interview, but also to obtain information about their relationships and their mutual perception and representation. Timelines, life stories as well as long and frequent informal conversational interviews were also used to deepen our knowledge about the community and the project and were employed mostly with key informants.

Of course, in the villages as well as in Kathmandu/Patan, a large amount of data was produced through informal interaction. Every conversation or encounter or experience we had could bring us important material for our analysis.

In the field only a few interviews and conversations were held in English. The rest were translated by the Nepali student from English to Nepali and *vice versa*. Most formal interviews were recorded with the permission of the interviewees. We had the feeling that this did not disturb the interviewees: as soon as we felt some discomfort we left the recorder aside. The translation process of course influenced the natural flow of the conversations, but at the same time gave time to both the interviewer and the interviewee to think about what it was being said and about the unfolding of the conversation.

In the last days in Patan before my departure, the team presented its first impressions and observations from the field trips in two meetings with TBSU staff and HELVETAS staff from other projects. The aim of the meetings was twofold: on the one hand, to share the first findings and a first tentative to formulate some recommendations for HELVETAS Nepal's practical work; on the other hand, to get feedback about the fresh observations.

After the end of the three months in Nepal, I assumed the responsibility for the data analysis and for the writing of this report. The Nepali team colleagues participated in the last phase by filling contextual knowledge and memory gaps. For the data analysis I used an open coding procedure, in order to be as open as possible to new issues and surprises from the data (Mikkelsen 2005). At the same time though, I also went through the data with the structure of some previously defined categories, for instance the categories of accountability elements presented in the previous chapters. The first draft of this report was sent to the Nepali team members, to TBSU staff and to other HELVETAS Nepal staff in order to review it and to give feedback and suggestions for improvement. The second draft of the report with the integrated feedback from Nepal was reviewed by HELVETAS Head office and by the IDS senior researcher. This final report will be shared with HELVETAS Nepal staff and with other (governmental and non-governmental) agencies working in the field. The three reports from Nepal, Mozambique and Bangladesh will be synthesised and published in a final synthesis report written by HELVETAS Head office jointly with IDS.

## 6 Findings

In this section I analyse the roles of the different actors actively and passively involved in the trail bridge project and of other actors in the project context. First I present the local authorities and the political parties and locate their accountability practices in the broader context beyond the project. This should help build an understanding of the context and accountability (or non-accountability) traditions in which the specific project is inserted. Second, with a similar aim, I sketch the scenario of NGOs' and CBOs' work in Nepal and

their role in promoting accountability and democratic practices, empowering community people, but also, in some cases, strengthening existing power relations. In the third section of the chapter I narrow my focus to the specific context of the trail bridge project and, in particular, the user committee. I analyse the accountability practices put in place by the committee and the shaping of its formal and factual boundaries in relation to power structures and participation. In the following section I discuss the Public Audit Practice, presenting the incentives and disincentives for different actors to participate in the meetings and the symbolic potential of the meetings. The last section of this chapter zooms out again to the broader implementation of Public Audit Practice in contexts different than the trail bridge project.

## **6.1 Local authorities and political parties**

Local authorities (i.e. VDC and DDC officials) and local political party representatives are the local political power holders: they administer public resources at local level and have decision making power about their use. The kind of accountability linked to this kind of power is *public accountability*: in order to be accountable to the broader population these actors have to justify their decisions in respect of the use of public resources.

The main public accountability tool elsewhere is elections (see Conceptual background). A characteristic of local political and institutional organisation in Nepal is the lack of elected local representatives since 2002 (see Context): formal power at local level is currently in the hands of centrally appointed officials. However, in fact, power is still shared between bureaucracy and party political actors: political parties still play a central role at local level. When asked about the changes after the dissolution of the all-party mechanism (APM, see Context), people mostly said that there was no change. The formal local authority still needs to consult political parties over every decision, for two reasons: firstly, because political parties still have considerable influence in the community and it would be difficult for officials to implement any decision without their support; and secondly, officials often cannot afford the burden of taking all decisions alone. In general, human and administrative resources are lacking or scarce; to take decisions, officials need the help of parties in the form of local and contextual knowledge about the community offered by local politicians.

### **6.1.1 Local authorities: horizontal and vertical accountability**

Although internal mechanisms of control (*horizontal accountability*) are partially provided for on paper, the control over local bureaucrats is lacking in effectiveness. Rent seeking and corruption are central issues in Nepal and are a widespread reality, although anticorruption initiatives increased after the first People's Movement in the 1990s and even more after the Peace Agreement in 2006. Corruption is so common that it is accepted as a natural phenomenon and in some cases corrupt behaviour is even seen as a positive quality. At the upper level, the Commission for the Investigation of Abuse of Authority (CIAA) represents a new tool for preventing corruption, but the cases that reach the central level are few in contrast to the widespread diffusion of corruption at all levels in the country. Because of a lack of personnel in the CIAA, civil servants have been representing the CIAA, thereby making action against civil servants involved in corruption and misconduct less effective.

Moreover, the system of formal and factual sanctions in cases of misconduct lacks effectiveness and transparency. We observed two different patterns in the career of officials, at all levels. The first pattern applies to officials appointed by the central government and thereafter holding their positions for a long time without fearing sanctions in case of misconduct. On the one hand the long duration of officials' positions can increase the efficiency of their work, in that long experience of performing the same tasks with the same communities permits them to develop an effective and efficient *modus operandi* and build a

trusting relationship with the communities. On the other hand, 'long duration' officers can profit from their position by building networks of patronage and promoting very personal interests (i.e. gaining money or favours through their position of authority). In the second pattern, all too common given the lack of transparency of the transfer mechanism, career officers can be transferred by central government decision suddenly and without justification. This of course can be seen as a means of fighting corruption by 'long duration' officers, but it reduces efficiency and limits the incentives of officials to engage in good work in the community.

In addition to horizontal accountability mechanisms such as the CIAA, Nepali acts and regulations foresee *vertical accountability* mechanisms to control the power of local authorities. Recently (see the 1999 Local Self-Governance Act, LSGA, and Regulation, LSGR) *social accountability* tools were introduced in governmental guidelines for local governance, among them social audits, community score cards and citizens' fora. This demonstrates a growing sensitivity of central authorities to issues of good governance and accountability. However, the *implementation* of such mechanisms is often very problematic. Firstly, being accountable to their citizens is not a priority for local authorities. The officers who now hold the whole formal power at local level are appointed by the central government and their positions do not depend on public opinion. Hence, their accountability efforts are directed first of all towards the central government. This is also due to inadequacies and ambiguities in the LSGA on how power and authority are shared among different governing units. One basic principle of LSGA is to make local governing units accountable to the people in their respective jurisdictions. However, the ambiguous roles in hierarchical structures have resulted in upward accountability. According to the Act the central government has the role of monitoring and supervising local bodies. This provision makes the lower governing body accountable to the upper ones rather than to their own constituencies. These legal provisions maintain and strengthen the upward chain of control. In addition, the Act provides power to the central government to suspend and dissolve the local bodies on several grounds. Similarly, the Act provides for rights and powers of central government to make special grants to any of the local bodies. This too makes central government or the upper tiers of the governing body more powerful and influential vis-à-vis the lower tiers by virtue of the former's capacity to allocate resources and impose conditionality.

Secondly, the environment of mistrust of authorities creates difficulties in the mobilisation of the community for social accountability. Because of the long heritage of poor transparency and accountability, people's attitude towards authorities has been suspicious. Hence, the potential of mobilising people by local authorities is low: sometimes, local authorities ask the help of civil society actors (local NGOs among others), whose mobilisation potential is higher. Often in the development field reference is made to the *empowerment* of citizens and communities (see below), but recently many agencies have recognised the importance of empowering state actors as well. Indeed, even if state actors are motivated by positive political will, they often do not have the resources and capacities to improve their governance mechanism and this task is even more difficult because of the suspicious and hard-to-change attitude of the population towards authorities.

Thirdly, examples of questionable implementation of social accountability tools by local authorities are numerous, which reinforces people's mistrust and suspicion in accountability's promotion by authorities. An example is public meetings organised by local authorities to which only other officials are invited, where the media are paid to give positive coverage, and the doors are closed to people's participation. As a result, attempts to promote accountability by local authorities are often perceived by people, but also by civil society actors in general, as rhetorical formality used to increase the legitimacy of the *status quo* rather than to improve good governance and real people's involvement.

The combination of the processes described here with a spread of numerous types of accountability tools (public, downward, social, etc.) used both by state and civil society actors, leads to the risk of *bureaucratisation* of such tools and to a consequent loss of their meaning. Although the implementation of accountability tools by state actors can be seen at a first glance as a positive achievement, we heard comments by development agents who are sceptical about the spread of such practices in governmental frameworks. The scepticism portends the risk of losing the (already difficult to achieve) confidence of people in such practices, if these practices lose their meaning by being employed only as formalities by authorities.

### **6.1.2 Political parties: informal accountability mechanisms**

The formal control mechanisms that apply to political parties are even weaker. The APM was not controlled by a formal public accountability tool such as elections. Political representatives did not have to fear elections because the party appointed them. Thus, their accountability imperative was towards their party (at the local and national level) and not to the people. However, after the peace agreement in 2006 people have been anticipating local elections, so, although they were not elected, today's politicians feel the pressure of future elections. An interesting question is whether and how the dissolution of the APM had an influence on accountability practices at local level. We could observe that the *de facto* decision-making process had not changed markedly. But has the accountability relationship between parties and bureaucrats and between parties and community changed? In this study we do not have many elements to answer this question. In addition, the APM was dissolved just a month before the research started and changes in respect of accountability will probably happen more slowly. The prospect of elections may well continue to constitute an incentive for politicians to act properly.

Furthermore, at the very local level accountability passes through informal mechanisms rather than through formal ones (see below). With the lack of local elections, accountability of local political representatives to the community is based almost solely on such informal channels, and it is via them that reputation and prestige can be sanctioned.

Moreover, while the APM was active, political parties were engaging in entities in which they had no formal role such as school management committees and community based organisations (CBOs). This demonstrates that at the local level political parties often abide by informal norms in determining their relations and influences. In some cases their involvement may promote accountable and informed decision making, but in other cases party affiliates may pursue solely individual or partisan interest, risking the politicisation of these entities. For all these reasons we can presume that there will not be substantial changes after the *de-formalisation* of political parties' power. Furthermore, the dissolution of APM was announced as a temporary measure against corruption, while looking forward to the new constitution, which should lead to local elections.

## **6.2 Community based organisations (CBOs) and non-governmental organisations (NGOs)**

In the communities we visited, the Public Audit Practice and the trail bridge user committee are not the only *participatory spaces*. Other participatory spaces are community institutions like community based organisations (CBOs) in the field of forest, irrigation, drinking water, cooperatives, health and education. CBOs have spread in the last ten to fifteen years and are now a strong presence in the communities. Most were created with the input of external actors, whether international agencies, local NGOs or (less frequently) the government. In many cases CBOs are created in the framework of development interventions. In these cases, CBOs are *invited spaces*, i.e. spaces created by a powerful actor, who *invites* the community to participate. In other cases grassroots movements are the creators of the new

spaces and sometimes are later helped by external actors. These cases are examples of *claimed* spaces, i.e. new participatory spaces established by the community.

### **6.2.1 Accountability practices**

The CBOs we observed activate different kinds of accountability mechanisms depending on their different degrees of formality and institutionalisation. In general, accountability mechanisms of CBOs towards the community are based on regular public meetings in which all members of the organisation can participate. Normally a committee carries out the executive tasks while the rest of the members participate in the meetings, following the happenings and the committee's work (which is also the basic concept of Public Audit Practice). Information is shared in such meetings and the public has the opportunity to question the committee's work. However, meaningful participation in the meetings is strongly influenced by social and economic variables, and invisible power structures shape the meetings by partially excluding women and disadvantaged people from meaningful participation. Moreover, committees are often formed (or at least controlled) by elites and powerful local people. In the case of most CBOs, too, accountability passes through informal channels rather than through the formal ones provided: information in both directions (from CBOs to the community and *vice versa*) seems to pass through everyday natural and personal channels, and thus the formal meetings should be understood as catalysts rather than as the information sharing process itself.<sup>11</sup>

Informal everyday conversations and information exchanges can thus have a role as accountability mechanisms. On the one hand informal accountability mechanisms may allow excluded sections of the community to get involved in the decision-making process, at least informally, when otherwise they could not. On the other hand informal mechanisms are not regulated by guidelines about inclusion and participation quotas and may thus strengthen existing dynamics of exclusion.<sup>12</sup> Indeed, natural communication networks and channels are mostly based on relationships of kinship, caste/ethnicity, gender and economic status. In this way, accountability risks becoming trapped within such networks and not reaching the very disadvantaged and marginalised groups.

### **6.2.2 The spread of development interventions**

International aid in Nepal started to flow in Nepal in the 1950s, but it was mostly after the first People's Movement in the 1990s that civil society organisations flourished at all levels (from local to national), thereby diffusing discourses on participation, democracy and development. However, such discourses entered (and still enter today) an environment of mistrust towards power holders, including towards powerful civil society actors.

Lack of transparency and accountability has characterised (and to a great extent still characterise) the country's history, not only on the part of governmental authorities but also on the part of development organisations. In particular, during the civil war, cases of politicisation, corruption or hijacking of development interventions led to a decrease of people's trust in the latter. As regards politicisation, political parties remain very prominent at the local level even today and a common strategy to broaden their influence, reputation and power is to assume control of projects, interventions or even entire local NGOs. Since the 1990s, the number of registered NGOs of all kinds and dimensions has boomed in Nepal. Also the availability of resources for development has increased, but not as much as the number of registered NGOs (the only ones that can receive international funds). Thus, the competition between NGOs has become a crucial factor in the development scenario of

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<sup>11</sup> The observations of this paragraph apply mostly to the visited trail bridge projects as well and are discussed more in depth later.

<sup>12</sup> As observed later, also formal mechanisms with inclusion guidelines and quotas cannot guarantee a meaningful participation.

Nepal and market rules are dominating the struggle for resources. Social exclusion issues also arise here: NGOs are generally dominated by high caste, wealthy, well educated men, even though this is changing in very recent times with positions in NGOs reserved for disadvantaged groups (women, low caste, minorities).

In spite of the many problematic issues just described, the spread of NGOs and participatory spaces shows the vitality of a civil society that has long been limited by an almost non-democratic political environment. CBOs and local NGOs can be regarded as the constituent elements for crafting an embedded structure of local governance in Nepal. These groups have gained considerable governance experience and are demanding recognition of their role in local governance.

### **6.2.3 Empowerment through social work<sup>13</sup>**

In addition to the assumptions of increased intervention effectiveness, increased ownership and the diffusion of desirable democratic habits *per se*, empowerment represents another target output of participatory approaches (see Conceptual background). With the described spread of civil society organisations and development intervention, the possibilities for people to become members of a group or a committee, i.e. of doing social work, have multiplied. Engaging in social work brings people many benefits: first of all reputational ones. Secondly, working in CBOs represents an opportunity for learning useful technical, social, managerial and political skills, which can also be used in other contexts to improve an individual's position in the community. Moreover, personal relationships and contacts are built, which are a very important resource in a rural society based mostly on personal and informal exchanges. In this sense, people are using a part of the development rent, which I argue can be measured more in terms of skill learning, contact building and reputation rather than in monetary terms (see again Conceptual background).

An interesting phenomenon we observed in the field is the creation of a tight network around CBOs. We observed that people doing social work frequently have the characteristics described above for the trail bridge user committees we met: male, well educated, wealthy, high caste and already with some reputation in the community (social status). Moreover, it is very likely that one person holds offices in more than one organisation. Thus, a tight network of personal relations is created around social work and consequently social work engagement becomes a further variable in the social stratification of society and may strengthen the existing exclusion patterns.

The personal story of a man we met in the second village is a very good example of the process of empowerment through participation in development projects and civil society organisations. The man, about thirty-five years old, comes from a disadvantaged group (Dalit) and began his 'career' seven years ago, when he started working for a local development project funded by international agencies. After two years he was 'promoted' and he was entrusted with an important position within the project. He explained to us that through the social work he learned many skills: he attended trainings in agriculture and also in management and accounting. Moreover, he built a tight network of personal relations with authorities, local NGOs and international agencies. He repeatedly declared to us that he always wanted to develop his village, which was at the time very backward, and that he always had in mind how to develop his village. Today he is one of the wealthiest people in the village and he participates in many CBOs. He is also recognised as one of the most

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<sup>13</sup> In this report I generally speak of *social work*, which is the term used in the communities to define every kind of engagement in work *for the community*. Political activities are included in the definitions we could gather on the field, while civil servants' work is not. *Social work* could therefore be intended as *unpaid community work*, considering yet that in some cases social work is symbolically remunerated.

influential people in the community, which resorts to him in the event of collective problems. Thanks to his personal relations he was able to find out how to formally apply for the trail bridge: this happened in a very accidental way during a meeting about another project, in which some representatives of the VDC and DDC and a local NGO were present. The man expressed the village's need for a trail bridge and was informed how to follow the formal procedure for the bridge application. Once the bridge project was approved, he entered the user committee, in which he holds a central position. The man had a limited education, but during his seven years of social work he learned all the necessary skills to lead a project.

This story is a good example of empowerment through social work and shows how the development rent is rather non-monetary and relies mostly on social capital. The question is consequently how this acquired power will be used. The man declared that he wants to develop the village and thanks to his engagement the community obtained many facilities and projects. Without powerful local personalities engaging for the community it is very difficult for the latter to obtain help and, finally, to develop. However, still too much depends on the good will of such (traditional and new) 'elites', whose power in the community is difficult to control and which is based mostly on informal relationship of patronage. Thus, whoever holds power of this kind has broad freedom to use it for own interests or for the interests of the community. Moreover, the creation and strengthening of patron-client relationships does not help the diffusion of democratic processes and leaves disadvantaged and marginalised people in a position of dependency.

#### **6.2.4 Empowerment through community meetings and audits**

With the diffusion of the *community approach*, responsibilities in the framework of development interventions were gradually shifted to the local community by creating project-specific committees and by including community meetings and audits in the project cycles (e.g. the Public Audit Practice). Like the involvement in an organisation or in a committee, but to a smaller extent, community meetings can represent a means to empower people of the community. Although I will affirm later that the meaningful participation of many people in such meetings is limited, these meetings should indeed represent a 'model' of democratic process. It is often true that many people cannot understand everything in the meetings and that they are intimidated and prefer not to exercise their voice; however, the meaningful participation of everybody is not something that can be achieved suddenly and quickly. But by attending one, two, three, ten and more meetings people slowly come in contact with democratic practices and they slowly develop a stronger awareness of their rights: this is a process that fits the definition of empowerment. Thus, although the real life context of project implementation is challenging, a discourse on participation, transparency and accountability is slowly getting a footing, through the repeated appeals and initiatives of development agencies among others. Villagers become increasingly used to participation techniques and to discourses on accountability and good governance. While speaking with them we often heard typical concepts like 'working for the community', 'inclusion of the whole population', 'being an active part of my own development' and statements like 'previously I was not participating in community works, but now I know that it is important'. We spoke with many women who told us how they have become aware, over the years, of their right to take part in collective decisions and now slowly begin to participate and exercise their voice, despite the basically patriarchal social structure of the context where they are living.

A problematic point in this process might be the multiplication of different kinds of community meetings and audits, with different degrees of *de facto* participation and transparency (remember the above paragraph on corruption and politicisation of NGOs and CBOs). This variety of 'models', definitions and implementations can lead to confusion and disorientation in the communities and thus hamper the sound diffusion of democratic practices.

Another problematic point is whether and how such discourses and declaration are then concretely translated into practice. The risk is that, often, such discourses remain just discourses and that, in their practical implementation, accountability and participation are still limited and biased. It is thus more difficult to assess whether, beyond discourses, a culture of participation, transparency and accountability is growing. Moreover, there are many other contextual factors that influence the growing of such a culture.

The counterpart of citizens' rights is citizens' responsibilities. Current discourses on citizenship and development are focusing more on rights than on the responsibilities of citizens. The discourses that we heard in the communities on citizenship were also focusing mostly on rights. People are getting used to the idea that local authorities have duties and responsibilities towards them and that they, consequently, have rights *vis-à-vis* authorities. The concept of responsibilities refers more often to the immediate community: it seems that people feel the importance (the responsibility) of engaging and working together for the community. The sense of obligation to the community is being strengthened through recent discourses on participatory development, but it is already rooted in the local tradition of rural contexts, where the sense of belonging to the community is higher than in urban (and more anonymous) contexts. Although the idea of responsibilities towards authorities is less developed, people are nevertheless aware of some obligations that they have to undertake in order to receive goods or services, for instance to participate in a meeting in order to have a trail bridge. The point here, which should be investigated through further research, is what kind of responsibility do people feel while participating in such meetings: is this a mechanical and formal act and do people feel their physical participation as a kind of 'payment' for the delivered good or service? Do they feel they need to be seen at the meetings because they fear local political, resource distribution or patronage repercussions? Or is this a more deep civic feeling of the responsibility of every citizen to participate in the decision-making process in a democratic society?

Other factors are influencing people's awareness of their rights as citizens. First of all, even though gaps in the education system and diffusion are still ample, basic education is today provided to the majority of Nepalis (Unicef 2012). Media can also play a crucial role in the sensitisation of people as citizens. However, in the remote regions of the country the diffusion of media is still at a very early phase. In the localities we visited in the mid hills, news from the district and national capital are difficult to obtain. In contrast, in the southern flatland media are widespread, with access to newspapers, radio and (to a lesser extent) television being provided to most people. In particular, local media are often promoting and diffusing discourses on development and participation, providing space for disadvantaged groups to express their voice and assuming often the role of advocates for public issues.

Another process is shaping power relations and participation patterns at local level: migration. The small village we visited in Surkhet (Ratamata, see Annex I) is characterised by enormous migration rates. In the village in Chitwan (Kumroj) migration rates are also high but not enormous as in Ratamata. The migration patterns of the two localities are very different: Ratamata has low skilled migration to Gulf countries, Malaysia and India. In addition to a similar low skilled migration, Kumroj has also a higher skilled migration to Western countries, mostly to the United States. Moreover, in Kumroj we could also observe an intra-national migration to the district capital and to Kathmandu, for work as well as for study. In Ratamata the changes caused by migration can be observed in the social organisation of the community and concern mostly the relationship between sexes. Being a very small village with a very high male migration rate, very few young men remain in the village. Suddenly, the organisation of social life in the village relies on women. Women now have to carry out, beside their traditional (reproductive and productive) tasks, the tasks traditionally ascribed to men, among which are the social and political tasks in the community. Thus, on the one hand, women are learning social and political skills, in a process that leads to their empowerment. On the other hand, women are being overburdened because they have to



carry out twice as much (or more) work. Moreover, we could observe that the control exercised by male emigrants on their wives, sisters and daughters is still very strong. This control is exercised by husbands mostly through their parents, in whose houses the wives habitually live according to tradition. Furthermore, the few men left in the village are dominating the social organisation of the community, thereby hampering women from really taking control of the community. The different migration rate and pattern in Kumroj do not have such palpable influences on the village as in Ratamata. Since the rates are lower, men are still largely represented in the community. Our research did not produce enough material to answer such questions, and was never intended to explore migration, but it would be interesting to further investigate whether and how the migration pattern of Kumroj is shaping the social structures of the village, thereby considering also the influence of external ideas and values that can reach the village from the migration destinations within and outside the country and from everyday contact with international tourists.

### **6.3 The trail bridge user committee**

Beside the space of the Public Audit Practice (see below), another important participatory space is created through the trail bridge project at the local level: the space of the user committee (UC). As already ascertained, the community approach to development intervention foresees the shifting of some responsibilities to the local community. This happens with a selected part of the community being invested with special power and responsibilities for the duration of the project. Like other project specific committees, the trail bridge UC is located halfway between the state (central government, local bodies), HELVETAS's TBSU and the local service provider on the one hand and the local community at the other (see Annex V). Firstly, the UC assumes some tasks that were previously carried out by the government (or by development organisations). Secondly, the UC represents the community in the implementation of the project: the UC is given negotiation power towards state actors and NGOs<sup>14</sup> and should represent the voice of the community. Thus, the UC's accountability is twofold: upward towards the state and the NGOs, which delegate to it part of the project execution, and downward towards the community, whose preferences the UC is supposed to represent.

Before analysing the accountability mechanisms characterising its work, it is necessary to remember briefly the concrete tasks of the UC (see also Annex III and IV) and to sketch out its relationship with the other actors involved in the trail bridge project (see also Annex V). Among the actors 'above' it (i.e. local authorities, TBSU and LSP), the UC has the closest relationship with the LSP. LSP staff regularly visit the bridge site and meet the UC in order to organise the work. The LSP follows very closely all steps of the bridge construction and gives technical, social and administrative support. For instance, the LSP explains to the UC how to keep the bridge documentation and accounts and which steps are needed for bridge building. The LSP is the coordinator between the DDC and the UC; for example specific material that cannot be found or produced in the community is provided by the DDC and delivered to the committee through the LSP and sometimes through TBSU. The contact of the UC with TBSU staff is less frequent, but regular: TBSU staff visit the bridge site (i.e. it visits the committee) at critical milestones of the bridge construction, checks the technical work and informs the UC and the LSP about the technical progress of the work. The contact of the UC with local authorities is less regular. In fact, the VDC does not have an active role in the construction process. Hence, there is contact between VDC and UC (or LSP) only if there is a problem that should be solved with the VDC (e.g. delays in the delivery of the budget by VDC). DDC engineers sometimes visit the bridge site to give technical support. Also with DDC, contact is required in case of a problem (e.g. again, a delay in budget delivery).

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<sup>14</sup> By speaking of 'NGOs' in the context of the trail bridge project I intend both the local service provider (as a local NGO) and HELVETAS Nepal (as an INGO).

As they are chosen from the bridge users' community, UC members are at the same time beneficiaries of the bridge. This means that UC members are automatically in constant contact with the community (or better, with a part of it, following the cited channels – of kinship, caste/ethnicity, etc. – of informal interactions), because they are part of it. The formal moments of contact between the community and their representatives in the committee are the Public Audit Practice. Moreover, specific contacts regarding the bridge project happen around the concrete works on the bridge. One of the UC's tasks is to mobilise the community to work for the bridge and to coordinate the concrete work on the bridge site: UC members acquire the necessary knowledge through a training input and later, step by step, through the LSP and the TBSU.

### **6.3.1 Accountability practices**

The most formal and structured accountability mechanism activated in the trail bridge project by the UC is the Public Audit Practice. On these formal occasions information about the project is shared and decisions are taken by consent with the community (see also Annex III): in other words, the committee is required to show and practice its accountability. However, the UC's accountability passes through other less formal and less structured channels. Upward accountability is exercised in less formal meetings between the parties: as said above, during the whole duration of bridge works the UC meets more or less regularly the TBSU, the LSP and the local authorities. In the same way, UC's downward accountability towards the community passes also through other less formal and not institutionalised mechanisms. As already observed, UC members are at the same time members of the community they represent. The localities we visited are situated in a rural context, where villages are organised according to traditional structures, which also include social control mechanisms. Social control relies on reputational costs and is effective in contexts where the size of the community is small enough to allow people to know each other very well. The size and the organisation of the communities we visited ensure that the behaviour of UC members is controlled through the natural everyday exchange of information during informal conversations. Thus, through such informal channels the community is regularly informed about the trail bridge and committee members are informed about the opinions and needs of the community regarding the bridge. The incentive for UC members to act conscientiously is the recognition of their work by the community, which would increase their prestige in the community. At the same time they have a disincentive to act unconscientiously because this would lead to losses in their reputation.

I described the position of the UC on the supply side of the accountability relation. However, the committee is also situated on the demand side inasmuch as it also requires accountability from the actors 'above' it, namely local bodies and NGOs. The UC has a specific role as intermediary between local authorities and the community in the process of demanding public accountability (see also Annex V). Indeed, the broad community has the opportunity to demand accountability from local authorities mostly in the formal spaces of the public meetings. However, the committee, as a representative of the community, has the opportunity to come closer to local authorities and request them to be responsible and answerable. For instance, in case of delay in transfer of resources by local authorities, it is a task of the UC (sometimes together with the LSP) to question the authorities about the delay and to request both the budget and an explanation for the delay. In this sense, the UC uses its special position within the project to hold authorities accountable. The same mechanism is activated between the UC and NGOs, but in this case I would call that *downward accountability* in its stricter sense, rather than *public accountability*. Also such accountability mechanisms are based almost on informal relations and personal contacts. They are implemented through the individual initiative of UC members, who go in person to the DDC office and request information or money. It is important to observe that in this process the role of the LSP is crucial: if the committee members do not have individual initiative, do not

trust themselves to speak with local authorities or just do not know how to do it, the LSP supports the UC in such tasks.

### **6.3.2 The participatory space of the user committee and its boundaries**

I described the bridge committee with regards to its upward and downward accountability. Now, I would like to analyse the characteristics of the specific space of the committee and its (formal and factual) boundaries. Indeed, the UC itself can be seen as a participatory space provided through the project's organisation (see also Annex V). The UC can be seen as an invited space: the state, together with the NGOs, creates this space (according to the governmental guideline for the bridge construction) and invites selected community members to participate. Thus, the UC has a special characteristic: it is an invited space, but after the 'invitation' it becomes a closed space, reserved to a selected group of people. In order to create an inclusive committee, governmental guidelines define its composition relying on proportionate representation of beneficiaries, with quotas reserved both for women and discriminated groups. The quotas are fulfilled and at least one main position in the committee is given to a 'disadvantaged' member. The whole community cannot participate in the committee, but has to designate representatives who will have the permission to enter the space. Thus, a space that was previously closed (with the centralised approach to trail bridge construction) is now opened to a selected part of the community (with the community approach, see also Context). The 'election' of the UC happens during the Public Hearing. As far as we could see and hear the 'election' happens in a consensus way: the community proposes some people and these automatically become committee members; often these people are the ones who were already involved in the initiation of the project before the hearing.

The formal and official boundaries of the trail bridge UC are set firstly by the governmental guideline and secondly by the community during the Public Hearing, according to the *de jure* power that both the guideline and the community formally hold in respect to the formation of the committee. However, the *de facto* power of the community to participate in the meetings and consequently decide about the formation of the UC is limited by a range of social, cultural and practical restraints (see next section). Therefore, it is often only a part of the community that in fact selects UC members. In the cases we visited, people who are selected to be members of the UC often have common characteristics: they are mostly wealthy and educated people who already have some experience in social work and reputation in the community. The tasks of the committee are not very easy and it is thus unlikely that the community chooses a person who does not possess good education and experience. Indeed, the first aim of the trail bridge project is to build a bridge in a quick and efficient way. In order to do that, it requires a UC composed of people who have the necessary capacities. Although the project includes training and skill development for committee members, of course the more skills the members already have, the more efficient the work of the committee is likely to be. As I already pointed out for the general case of CBOs, working for the trail bridge UC, too, is a way of empowerment on different levels: members can learn technical, social, managerial and political skills, strengthen own social networks both within and outside the community (also with important actors as NGOs and local authorities) and improve their reputation in the community. Channelling these benefits (also) towards the disadvantaged part of the population is an objective of 'transformational social mobilisation' (see Context) that is not contemplated in 'transactional social mobilisation'. However, if the people actively working in the UC are the ones who are already powerful in the community (as it is often the case), there is the risk of further strengthening those powerful people and increasing the gap with the rest of the community.

We could observe that out of the formal frame of the Public Hearing other boundaries are informally set. Indeed, we met the interesting figure of the User Committee Advisor, who, although not an official member of the committee, works closely with it, follows the work and

happenings and provides his advice within the committee. Although the position is not institutionalised in the guidelines, local people perceive it as official. The Advisor is in fact a completely unofficial position, arbitrary and not subjected to any kind of formal control. Normally, UC Advisors are men who could not or did not want to enter officially the committee for any number of reasons: an example are teachers, who are not allowed to enter the committee. Moreover, advisors normally have experience with social work and have a position of respect within the community. With the unofficial position of the advisor, the boundaries of the user committee are shaped outside of the formal Public Hearing and are set by powerful people in the community.

Other unofficial boundaries are drawn also within the official UC. As already mentioned a system of quotas guarantees the *formal* inclusion of women and disadvantaged groups in the committee. However, this does not mean that the selected disadvantaged people are able to actively participate in the committee. Indeed, we could observe invisible power playing a central role in shaping the *modus operandi* of the committee by limiting the meaningful participation of disadvantaged members, thus shaping the internal factual boundaries of the committee.

Women are included in the committee, but a long tradition of exclusion inhibits them from really exercising their position in the group. Local traditional society is based on a strong patriarchal model. The roles (and rules) are traditionally fixed, dividing male tasks and female ones. Community work, politics (in a broad sense) and the contact with authorities are all tasks traditionally reserved to men. Thus, even though they can be physically present<sup>15</sup>, in group discussions women traditionally speak only if they are explicitly requested or if the issue discussed is explicitly and directly linked with them. Women do not dare to speak also because they often have had less education than men, which is also a heritage of patriarchal society, where education was provided preferentially to boys. There are also practical reasons for the limited participation of women. In the villages we visited, women are very overburdened with work: indeed, they have to carry out all reproductive tasks in the house as well as hard productive tasks in the fields. Thus, the gender division of work leaves less time to women to be invested in social work and in skill development. In the participatory space of the UC, power is given to women *de jure*, inasmuch as they have the right and even the duty (in order to fulfil the quotas) to participate. However, invisible power structures inhibit them from meaningfully participating *de facto*. We observed that discourses on women empowerment, women participation, gender equity and the like are widespread in the communities. However, by comparing the discourses I heard with the reality I saw, I can argue that such discourses are often only rhetoric and could not yet achieve change in the fundamental structure of the society. This is of course a very long process, which includes the reshaping of old traditional meanings and habits. The fact that such discourses have started to circulate in the community can be seen as a first step in the long process to achieve gender equality. Disadvantaged groups (ethnic groups, low castes) face the same restraints faced by women and described in this paragraph: although power is given to them *de jure* in the space of the UC (through quotas and inclusion requirements), invisible power structures limit their actual participation in the group.

Thus, even if the committee is inclusive on paper, it is not self evident that participation in it will be inclusive. The committee is very often dominated by traditional elites (men, high caste, well educated, wealthy) and other members sometimes have no space to really express their opinion and defend their interests. Moreover, the participation of women and disadvantaged groups is limited by invisible power structures. The latter create a sense of self-censorship and intimidation, which decreases the motivation to participate actively. Indeed, a very

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<sup>15</sup> Often women do not participate at all because of the restraints explained here, but in general the physical presence of women in community discussions does not seem to be problematic. In the framework of development projects, guidelines by the government or by agencies underline the importance of their presence, but yet their participation is hampered by the restraints described in these paragraphs.

common mechanism we observed is the participation only on paper, in the very sense of the expression: women (mostly, but also members from disadvantaged groups or other people who are too overburdened) do not physically participate in committee meetings, but only later write their signature on the minutes. We could notice that the real activity of the UC (normally of nine to fifteen people) is carried out by a very limited number of persons, namely three to five high caste, wealthy, educated and socially engaged men. Thus, committee meetings are often meetings of that small group and are consequently dominated by it. Moreover, most other tasks of the committee including contact with the LSP, TBSU and local authorities are carried out by that small group, which means the creation of social work networks (see Annex V).

#### **6.4 The participatory space of the Public Audit Practice**

Beside the invited/closed participatory space of the trail bridge user committee, the main participatory spaces created by the trail bridge project are those of the Public Audit Practice (see Context and Annex III for a detailed description of the practice). The LSP organises the Public Hearing, while the organisation of Public Review and Audit is a task of the committee. The presence of both actors is compulsory, as is the participation of a TBSU representative. Local authorities (DDC and VDC) are strongly invited to participate, but in fact their participation is far from given. Donor agencies that pay their funds into the common basket of the local bridges subsector of the governmental Department (see Context) are not represented since the funds, once they come in the basket, are handled as state resources. The whole community is invited to participate and this happens normally with the informal tool of 'word of mouth' invitation, namely UC members (or LSP staff) going door-to-door inviting people to the meetings.

##### **6.4.1 Incentives, disincentives and restraints to participation**

The participation of the 'invited actors' (local authorities and broader community) in the meetings is limited by a range of disincentives and costs. For local authorities the benefits of participation consist mostly of reputation, recognition and legitimacy in the community, but these incentives are not supported by formal sanctions in case of nonparticipation. Moreover, the costs of participation may be manifold. First, material constraints of time limit the participation of local authorities. This problem lies well beyond the case of PAP, with local authorities being often overburdened and lacking adequate human and material resources. Second, as public meetings are an occasion where people might more or less freely ask questions to local authorities, the latter often prefer not to participate, so that they do not have to provide answers.

For the broader community, participation costs are mostly material. Investing hours in meetings whose outputs and final usefulness are not really tangible does not attract people, who prefer to invest those hours in their everyday tasks. Indeed, like in all democratic mechanisms, individual participation may seem not to bring concrete benefits to individuals and the free rider problem is found in Nepal as well as in the rest of the world. Thus, we observed that UC members, LSP staff and other engaged people of the community have to insist and convince people to participate, by using the rhetoric of democracy and trying to 'teach' people the importance of everybody's participation.

Another reason why people may not willingly attend public meetings is that in many cases their meaningful participation in discussions is limited by cultural and social restraints. I already described how social structures and traditions limit the meaningful participation of disadvantaged and marginalised people in the space of the bridge committee. We could also clearly see that many people from the broader community who attend the meetings in fact often do not completely understand what is said and discussed and, if asked, cannot

re-explain the contents, because they lack the capacity of analysing phenomena and events or of reproducing the thoughts in words. The intellectual participation is much more complex than the simply presence at the meetings. These observations also underline a communicative problem between those who have to present information or a message and their audience: it can be argued that the presenters may not have found the best way to convey their message to an audience whose realities are different from their own. In such a vicious circle people can be intimidated or frustrated and their meaningful participation is even more limited.

Thus, although the participatory space of the PAP is formally open to everybody, in fact boundaries and limits to meaningful participation are shaped by the existing social and cultural structures and traditions. The latter can be seen as the manifestation of *invisible power*. *De jure*, power is given to the whole community, inasmuch as the whole community is invited in the invited participatory space of the PAP and has the possibility of taking part in the decision-making process and of questioning the actors in power. Hidden power determines the social structures lying beyond the actors' room for manoeuvre, i.e. their capacity of setting the agenda and the issues to be discussed in the meeting. Of course, the implementers of PAP have an important room of manoeuvre, in the sense that the UC, together with the LSP and the TBSU, can decide what issues will be discussed in the meeting and when. However, while observing the dynamics of the meetings, but even more their preparation, we noticed that this power is exercised mostly by the NGOs, which 'explain' to UC members how to conduct the meeting and in this way shape its development and implementation. Moreover, during the meeting not everybody can completely follow the contents: this fact, together with social structures of discrimination – that is, invisible power –, limits the factual power of many people to exercise their voice. As a consequence of hidden and invisible power structures, the most powerful people of the community (i.e. the most educated and with the biggest reputation) have the possibility to 'direct' the development of discussions in the public meetings.

#### **6.4.2 The symbolic space of the Public Audit Practice**

The PAP represents a formalised space of information and participation. However, I showed how the meaningful participation within it has some limitations. While talking with people about the bridge, we noticed that they had accessed the information about the project mostly through informal channels, which follow specific vectors of diffusion. These vectors are mostly linked with kinship, caste/ethnicity, friendship and social work networks. We also observed that people normally do not know much about or do not remember much of the public meetings (whether held in the framework of the trail bridge project or of other projects). Thus, it can be argued that PAP is not the main information channel for project related information. Rather, PAP is the occasion for the information process to be started: after the first seeds are sown during the PAP, information will spread throughout the community through informal channels. Thus, the PAP should be seen as a starting point (a catalyst) of the information sharing process. Moreover, as PAP events are of short duration and some of its time is consumed by regular formalities (and by rhetorical speeches, see next paragraph), there is often insufficient time left for detailed discussions and debates. Thus, these meetings can play the role of instigator or initiator of further discussion and debates.

The PAP is a high symbolic space, i.e. an arena where the various actors present themselves and negotiate together. As explained in the Conceptual background, by 'arena' I mean the broad (and also abstract) space of interaction between actors. In the case of PAP, this arena comes to be very concrete and 'tangible'. Indeed, it is a physical space where people physically meet, see each other and discuss. Thus, actors can use that space to present themselves, build their image in the community and promote their own message, which allows them also, in some cases, to hijack the meetings for their political and electoral aspirations. The broad use of rhetorical speeches during the meetings can also have the

consequence of diverting the attention and the motivation of the public to pay attention to the content of the meeting. Indeed, a very large part of the time in meetings is occupied by formal speeches. The latter are held mostly by local authorities (in the rare case they are present), political parties (although they do not have a formal role in the project, they are often involved in the initiation process as well as in UC's work), LSP and TBSU.

During the meetings, moreover, the facilitation, the spatial configuration and in general non-verbal messages influence markedly the way in which people perceive the various actors and their role in the project. For instance, participation of local authorities in the meetings is very limited. I already highlighted that local authorities often avoid attending meetings because of the risk of having to face the demands, complaints and grievances of the community. Since people usually do not have opportunity to interact with the local officials, they are tempted to use any occasion whenever and wherever possible to voice their concerns and grievances collectively. Thus, even if they are present, officers often assume a reluctant attitude during the meeting: they hold the necessary formal speeches and try then to slide into the background, thus avoiding the attention of people. This attitude of officers during the meeting, together with the prominent role of UC, LSP and TBSU in the facilitation of the meeting, can lead people to believe that state actors do not have an important role in the project. The problem I see here is that the trust in the government/state is so low that it is very difficult for people to recognise the actions of the state, because of the widespread assumption that, anyway, the state does not do anything for the community. Moreover, the lack of interface between the state and its citizens calls into question the legitimacy of the state.

Two other issues are topical in literature on development and are consistent with the previous observations, namely both processes of decentralisation and shifting of responsibilities away from the state (Korf 2010). Decentralisation has become a central approach to development and in Nepal has also been promoted by the government (see Context). At the same time, a process of 'outsourcing' from the state has taken place and is still ongoing with the shifting of what were traditionally state's tasks and responsibilities to both the private sector and the civil society. In the case of the trail bridge programme in Nepal both processes can be observed. On the one hand, the central government has shifted many responsibilities to local authorities, while on the other an overall community approach to bridge construction has substituted the previous centralised one, shifting responsibilities to civil society actors like (I)NGOs and private agencies. Nowadays, the DDC is officially the main actor in trail bridge projects. However, often the state is *factually* not recognised as an important actor in the project: this is because of the long tradition of mistrust in the state, but also because of the delegation of many project-related tasks to civil society (TBSU, LSP, UC).

## **6.5 Public Audit Practice and accountability in other frameworks**

Similar issues and problems are found in other applications of PAP in projects outside the TBSU. Besides those already described, some other particular issues should be mentioned here. The trail bridge project has the characteristic of producing an output – the trail bridge – that is a public good: all the people have access to and use the bridge, without discrimination. This is not the case for other projects, for example if the output is a small irrigation system whose use is reserved to a limited part of the community. In such cases transparency and broad information are even more crucial in order to avoid feelings of envy and discrimination.

Another specific characteristic of TBSU is that the bridge is a tangible good. Projects that are dealing with tangible outcomes are also called hardware projects in jargon and are

juxtaposed to software projects.<sup>16</sup> I already analysed the difficulty of people understanding the content of a public meeting and the difficulty speakers at the meeting have conveying their messages in the case of hardware output like the trail bridge. In the case of software projects it is even more difficult. Thus, implementing the PAP in software projects is even more challenging and specific tools have to be put in place in order to make the information more understandable. Some software programmes of HELVETAS Nepal implement the PAP in groups: the meetings are thus not organised with all stakeholders together at the same time, but in homogeneous stakeholder groups. This allows the implementers of PAP to focus the information and discussions on the interests and capacities of the specific stakeholder group.

We could assess that in the case of other projects accountability also passes through different channels than the PAP. Some software projects whose objectives focus on the support and empowerment of local authorities implement their accountability by regularly presenting their plans and budget in formal meetings with local authorities. Such meetings do not fit the definition of PAP, but are important occasions where HELVETAS shares information and promotes the discussion of its projects and plans. In this sense, such meetings can be also seen as a group-specific PAP. With regards to the broader population, projects that have less experience with PAP often implement it in a less formalised way, by holding more meetings with less rigidly defined agendas. In this way these projects are exploring possibilities to optimise the structure of meetings. Furthermore, in many projects the direct accountability of HELVETAS towards beneficiaries passes through other less formal mechanisms: for instance some projects have a social mobiliser in their staff. Social mobilisers often improvise public meetings whenever and wherever they see the opportunity and take the occasion to diffuse information about the project and gather voices from the community.

Among the accountability tools promoted and employed by other organisations in the country, I would like to end this chapter with one tool that I find particularly interesting, namely the community score card (CSC) (Khadka and Bhattarai 2012; Ackerman 2005). As explained above, often citizens lack the opportunity to meet the authorities and discuss collective issues with them. Moreover, I assessed a widespread mistrust from citizens towards authorities. The CSC is a tool that offers to citizens, authorities and service providers an apposite space to meet and discuss collective issues. The procedure of CSC sets the focus on the exchange of perspectives and interpretations of the participating entities, thereby aiming at building trust among them. Of course, the PAP also creates an interface between the community, its representatives (UC, political parties), local authorities (if present) and NGOs. However, contrarily to the CSC, PAP's space is created mostly for a one way transmission of information and for the discussion of specific project related issues. Although I stated earlier that the PAP's space is often used by the community to discuss other, non project related issues, this is not the primary aim of PAP, but rather an unforeseen expansion of it.

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<sup>16</sup> Some examples of *software* projects are the *Citizen Action for Results through Transparency and Accountability* (CARTA), which promotes bottom up monitoring systems for World Bank development projects; the *Linking smallholders with local institutions and markets* (LINK), which develops agricultural skills by villagers and sustains the local authorities in the planning process; and the *Safer Migration project* (SaMi), which acts both at local level by diffusing information about risks and dangers of migration and at central level by the policy making. For more information see HELVETAS Nepal website: [www.helvetasnepal.org.np](http://www.helvetasnepal.org.np) (accessed 09.10.12).



# 7 Conclusions

Nepal is today at a turning point in its history. The 240 year long monarchy has been transformed into a federal republic after numerous democratic attempts and after a long and harmful civil war. Since 2006 Nepal is on its road to building a new – democratic, inclusive and stable – state that should be the starting point to finally relieve Nepalis from the difficult economic and social conditions that are still limiting their livelihood today. Accountability is a central issue on the path towards a new state. In their history, Nepalis have experienced many changes in the political situation of their country; accountability and transparency have been fundamentally missing from the political culture and Nepali citizens have habitually had difficulties in trusting their authorities. Now, with the stalled process of drafting the new constitution, there is the hope for setting the framework for an accountable and democratic government, but the way is long and full of obstacles.

For over sixty years ago HELVETAS has been promoting not only economic and social development but also democratic culture. In particular, with the tool of Public Audit Practice the organisation is trying to diffuse a culture of transparency and accountability between actors and in different directions: from HELVETAS towards the state and the beneficiaries as well as from the state towards its citizens. This HELVETAS initiative plays out in a context where various international and regional agencies are implementing different kinds of development projects promoting discourses on participation and democracy to varying degrees. However, factual democratic habits and culture are still lacking in the country, with the political scenario dominated by individual power struggles around self-interest and by widespread corruption.

## 7.1 Contextual factors influencing accountability initiatives at the local level

With the present study, we wanted to analyse which contextual factors influence the implementation of accountability initiatives at local level. As is the case with democracy, the building of accountability and of *habits* of accountability is a long process in which traditional social structures and attitudes are slowly changed. Thus, a single initiative like the one we investigated<sup>17</sup> cannot change markedly or quickly the social and political scenario of the community in which it is implemented. Numerous contextual, long lasting and cultural factors influence the attitude of people towards such initiatives and their capacity to meaningfully participate in them:

- The existing (lack of) accountability and transparency practices outside the framework of PAP influence the attitude of governmental as well as civil society actors towards accountability. In the locations we visited, the broader institutional and political settings do not provide incentives for accountable and transparent behaviour of powerful actors.
- In order to effectively implement accountability and transparency (both inside and outside the project), powerful as well as less powerful actors on both sides of the accountability relationship (supply and demand side) need to have enough material (financial, temporal) and human (cultural, educational) resources, which are often not available.
- Polarised power structures and discriminatory social and cultural traditions relating to gender, caste/ethnicity, economic status limit the meaningful participation of traditionally

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<sup>17</sup> TBSU's intervention covers all 75 country districts, while the other HELVETAS's projects are concentrated in 24 districts. PAP is implemented in all 14 HELVETAS projects in the country, with the mentioned differences. In 2011 181 new bridges were constructed with the support of TBSU and the target for the period 2009-2014 amounts to 2,200 new bridges. HELVETAS Nepal's Annual Report for 2011 relates over 630,000 disadvantaged people (Nepal's population amounts to over 30 millions people) benefitted by HELVETAS's interventions. (All information from HELVETAS Nepal 2012).

disadvantaged groups. These groups are more likely also to face material restraints to participation. In a context where a strong local elite controls the community, it is more difficult for traditionally excluded people to enter the accountability and information systems and to participate in them.

- The openness and also the capacity of people to participate in accountability and transparency processes depends on their familiarity with them. In contexts where participatory development interventions are numerous and frequent and where civil society is active and vibrant, people are more likely and at ease to participate in accountability and transparency processes. However, if the different interventions are not well coordinated, their overlap can also create confusion and mistrust.
- Informal mechanisms of control and information (i.e. of accountability and transparency) can be very strong in rural contexts. The kind of links and interplay of such mechanisms with more formal mechanisms and tools can strengthen or weaken the latter, and can ameliorate or worsen the degree of inclusion in accountability and transparency processes.
- Whenever state actors are involved in accountability and transparency initiatives, the legitimacy of the state and the trust (or mistrust) of citizens towards it comes to play an important role in such initiatives, influencing the readiness of people to effectively and meaningfully interact with authorities.

## **7.2 Towards accountable local authorities**

Institutional and political settings play a crucial role in the success of accountability initiatives. In the current Nepali context, the willingness of local authorities to be accountable to their citizens is limited principally by the lack of local elections: officials are appointed by the central government and are thus primarily accountable to it. At the same time political representatives – who do not hold formal power at the local level, but are still very influential – are not elected by citizens and are thus primarily accountable to their parties. Although good regulations and frameworks exist on paper, horizontal accountability mechanisms within the state are still weak and corruption is widespread because of the lack of a sanctions system and the habitual impunity and tolerance of such practices. Local authorities often lack the resources and the capacities (and sometimes also the political will) to implement real accountability. Social accountability tools like the Public Audit Practice could empower state actors in their capacity to be accountable. However, such initiatives have to take into consideration the fact that the incentives for state actors to be accountable are lacking and should therefore also address the need to create a broader system of incentives.

The fragility of the national context is manifest at the local level in the lack of local elections, frequent changes in the institutional framework, weak horizontal control mechanisms and, in general, in a widespread mistrust in authorities and consequent lack of legitimacy of power holders. All these elements lead local authorities and party representatives to take a very short term perspective and take advantage of current conditions because forecasting the future is very difficult. Thus, the instability at national level translates into very short term thinking at local level, which leaves space for underperformance by local political actors.

At the very local level other kinds of accountability mechanisms are playing an important role in maintaining minimal stability and responsiveness of local authorities and political parties. These are informal mechanisms of control and sanctions, based on social control and reputational costs. These kinds of informal mechanisms have the opportunity to work at the local level in rural and small scale contexts, where personal relations within the community are very tight and where officials and political representatives are at the same time part of the community they are working for and representing. The Public Audit Practice can and does

take advantage of such informal mechanisms: it can be seen as an institutionalised and formal catalyst of more informal processes of control, information and discussion.

### 7.3 Towards active and engaged citizens

The diffusion of the Public Audit Practice, embedded in a context of multiple participation and accountability initiatives, can contribute to the building of a democratic attitude by both the state and citizens. The involvement of people in two participatory spaces – the user committee and the Public Audit Practice – represents an important opportunity for empowerment and learning technical and social skills. The awareness of citizens about their rights and about the responsibilities of power holders is increased, contributing to the building of a democratic culture. The active participation of citizens in requesting and promoting social accountability is stronger in contexts where people are more accustomed to such practices, i.e. in contexts where various initiatives are being implemented. However, the question arises of whether what is being diffused is a real democratic *culture* or only superficial habits of democratic *discourses*, meaninglessly repeated, which do not change the basic traditional attitude. With the spread of participatory tools and participatory development initiatives, by development agencies as well as by the government, the very meaning of such tools and initiatives risks being weakened and becoming a mere formality to be accomplished in order to receive funds and projects.

Initiatives promoting formal accountability tools should take into account the importance of informal mechanisms. Formal practices seem often to work by catalysing informal mechanisms based on social control and reputational costs. These informal mechanisms represent an important asset for improving transparency and accountability. Everyday social relations are a very powerful means to diffuse information and to guarantee a degree of control over people in power, if those people are also part of the community. However, such informal channels are shaped strongly by invisible power structures and social and cultural traditions, thereby excluding a large part of the population from information-sharing and decision-making processes.

The same invisible power structures and social and cultural traditions shape the implementation of formal mechanisms as well. Such factors limit the meaningful and inclusive participation of all citizens, in particular of traditionally disadvantaged groups. Invisible power and social structures often go unrecognised and/or unaddressed in the design of development initiatives and also in the design of PAP and in the practices and roles prescribed for actors. Often participatory practices and instruments end up controlled by local elites and already powerful groups, which leads to their further empowerment through the benefits provided by the development rent and also in terms of social network building and reputation. The topic of elite capture and of the risk of participatory development interventions reproducing existent power relations and exclusion patterns is widely discussed by authors (Olivier De Sardan 2005; Gaventa 2006; Cornwall and Coelho 2007b) and needs deeper reflection by practitioners who promote transparency. Elites are often demonised as the local ‘baddies’ and the attitude of practitioners, or at least their rhetoric, is generally to avoid them. However, elites play an important role in the community, and their presence can be also seen as a resource for development. Thus, in designing development interventions, it is crucial to understand the role elites are playing in the community and can play for its development<sup>18</sup>.

The importance of the participatory spaces – both the Public Audit Practice and user committee – in the framework of the community approach to bridge construction was evident in this study. The user committee itself can be seen as an accountability tool through which

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<sup>18</sup> This argument was put forward about national and ruling elites by Hossain and Moore in 2002 (Hossain & Moore 2002) and was extended to local elites by, among others, Dabo et al (n.d.) and World Bank 2008.

the community holds local authorities and NGOs to account. Regarding the inclusiveness of the user committee, we noticed the same problems described above: social and cultural traditions are limiting the inclusiveness of the user committee as well.

While we have not studied any 'counterfactual' evidence from a non fragile setting, it seems reasonable to assume that the fragility of the context exacerbates all the described factors: for instance the low effectiveness of public services limits the economic and social development of communities, thereby limiting their capacities and possibilities to meaningfully participate. Moreover, the weak legitimacy of the state present at the national as well as the local level leads to the consequent mistrust of people in their state at all levels, which again limits the motivation of people to participate.

## 8 Recommendations and perspectives

### 8.1 General recommendations

- I highlighted many times in this report the crucial role of *power*: in the framework of a development intervention existing power relations and social structures have to be analysed in depth in order to take advantage of their positive potentials and to minimise the negative ones. This concerns the structures of invisible power and the problem of elite capture among others.
- The crucial role played by elite and powerful people in development intervention must be recognised. Stigmatising elites as something (always and only) negative should be avoided and, at the same time, their positive potential should be recognised. In doing this, it is important to consider the power of such elites and develop strategies to control and 'direct' it towards positive outcomes for the whole community.
- This report underlined also the importance of informal accountability mechanisms: the challenge is to make the most of the potential of such mechanisms and at the same time to find ways to include disadvantaged people in them. At the same time, it is important to reflect about the relationship between informal and formal mechanisms, thereby questioning whether formal mechanisms are always the optimal way in contexts where informal channels predominate.
- I ascertained that factual inclusion is not always guaranteed in formal accountability mechanisms. Therefore, as for the already cited informal mechanisms, it is important to invest some energy in thinking how to also include disadvantaged people more effectively in formal mechanisms of accountability and transparency.
- It is important to act on both sides of the accountability relation, especially to work to empower citizens in their awareness and capacity to promote accountability (demand side) as well as to motivate local authorities to be accountable and to give them the necessary capacities (supply side). However, these processes of empowerment should be thought through by considering the broader contextual factors, which can present conditions that hamper the real implementation of such initiatives. Depending on the openness of governments, there could be also room for intervention on such hampering contextual factors (i.e. policy making and concrete implementation).
- Of course, many of the factors I cited in this report as having an influence on accountability initiatives are very broad and complex and are beyond the reach of a single project or programme like the Trail Bridge Support Unit or the Public Audit Practice. Furthermore, social and cultural structures and habits require consistent efforts over a long time to be changed. Nevertheless, it is important to be aware of the social and cultural restraints people are facing while engaging in a specific project, in order to reduce their negative hampering impact. An objective of development intervention could, consequently, also be the challenging of such restraints, for instance acting directly on

- gender and caste/ethnic discrimination and on education, or trying to limit the described material restraints to participation.

## 8.2 HELVETAS Nepal specific recommendations

- In the context of Nepal, where state is in transition and its legitimacy and effectiveness are weak, it is even more crucial that engagement pays particular attention to the empowerment of governmental institutions in their capacity and willingness to be accountable towards their citizens. HELVETAS already undertook this by including in its programmes the empowerment of state actors.
- The very vital civil society, with the spread of CBOs and NGOs in recent times, has important potential for Nepal. Indeed, CBOs and grassroots movements are the elements that allowed the continuity of everyday life at local level despite the important (and sometimes dramatic) changes at the central level. Thus, it is important to invest resources and energies at the grassroots level, strengthening the potential of such organisations to manage and direct development at the local level.
- The spread of (I)NGOs and CBOs leads to the risk of overlapping and increasing confusion if interventions and discourses are not harmonised on a common ground. It is important to consider the influence of other interventions and programmes and to take the advantage of possible synergies, while paying attention to possible confusing overlaps.
- Nepal is mostly a rural country; the considerations emphasised above about social control and informal mechanisms of transparency and accountability are particularly important. However, marginalisation patterns are still strong and are based mostly on gender and caste/ethnicity. Thus, even more strongly in Nepal, it is crucial to pay particular attention on the inclusion of marginalised people in such informal as well as in formal mechanisms.

## 8.3 PAP and TBSU specific recommendations

- PAP represents an opportunity to empower both state actors and the community. It also represents an opportunity for these actors to meet. However, I emphasised that often participation is limited by social, cultural and practical restraints, which should be considered in the implementation of the initiative. Thus, it is important not only to guarantee a *formal* participation of disadvantaged people with the fulfilment of quotas, but also to empower them in order to guarantee their *meaningful* participation. This, of course, is almost beyond the reach of a small intervention, yet some measures can be taken to improve the possibilities of people to meaningfully participate, for instance through trainings on specific skills. Moreover, attention should be paid not to overburden people with tasks and responsibilities. Indeed, it happens often that few people carry out many positions in different projects and this limits their meaningful participation. It is necessary to involve other people, who perhaps do not have the experience or the education required for the project, but who can be trained in order to acquire the necessary competencies. Attention should be paid to the selection process of user committee members, who often are 'forced' to engage in the committee because of their experience, but who can then not afford the time for the many tasks and responsibilities. In order to act on these problems, tight social mobilisation is needed that should be sensible about such issues: local service providers can play a more crucial role here.
- The considerations of the previous point apply also to the problem of elite capture. By widening the range of people engaging in social work (for instance in the user committee), power is shared with more people, thereby limiting the monopoly of elites. It is also necessary to think about other strategies to limit and/or control elites' power in the framework of development projects.

- In order to build a trustful relationship between state and citizens, it is important to be aware of the symbolic potential of the space of PAP, which can be used to promote the image and the engagement of local authorities towards the community. Thus, I suggest that local authorities should play a more active role during meetings, so that people can recognise their important role in the projects.
- As ascertained in this report, the creation of an interactive interface between communities and authorities on issues broader than a specific project is not the explicit aim of PAP. Rather, the discussion of broader community issues is a secondary extension of PAP. Nevertheless, I hold that the creation of such interfaces is of primary importance in the building of a trusting relationship between the state and its citizens. Therefore the possibility of broadening such interfaces within the framework of PAP or in other frameworks could be considered (an interesting example I mentioned are community score cards, which for instance could be introduced in the project cycle).
- During PAP meetings the information sharing process can be improved. Indeed, I underlined in the report that the public often does not grasp the content of the meetings. Therefore, it is important to think about other ways of communicating and delivering messages and information. For instance, rhetorical and theoretical speeches could be limited and the focus can be set on concrete issues. Visualisation tools like hoarding boards can also be useful.
- Particular attention should be given also to the process of information sharing before the implementation phase of projects. People should be better informed about, for example, the possibility of applying for a trail bridge.
- In the balance between informal and formal tools, information can be shared and voices can be collected not only through official meetings like the ones we attended, but also through informal conversations. Some HELVETAS Nepal projects are already experiencing communication forms at the middle way between formal and informal, for instance with improvised public meetings to share information about the projects.
- Very frequently, in the implementation of trail bridge projects problems arise with fabricators and contractors. These problems have consequences also on the image of the user committee and of the other actors. Therefore, the accountability of these private sector actors should be strengthened also.

## 8.4 Perspectives

This study explored the contextual factors that can influence the success of accountability initiatives in some specific cases in Nepal. The research questions were very broad and the objective was to really *explore* all possible factors. We employed a qualitative case study approach, which, for the reasons explained in the fifth chapter, was the approach that better suited the study's aim. In this way we could gather a large amount of information including possible correlations. However, the resources for this research project did not allow deepening the analysis of the single themes and issues. Thus, my observations are often very general and further – qualitative and quantitative – research is needed to assess the real importance and influence of the factors identified.

In the field I focused my attention mostly on people of the community, in particular on the members of the trail bridge user committee. On the one hand this allowed me to analyse in depth the space of the user committee, but on the other I might have paid too limited attention to DDC and VDC officials. Thus, this report reflects rather the views and perceptions of the community than the ones of state actors. Further research should analyse the behaviour and strategies of individual officers.

Moreover, the situation of the country is changing very rapidly. Hence, some of my observations about the institutional settings of accountability may become obsolete very soon. However, cultural and social factors and habits will not change soon and therefore the

observations about such issues will probably still be relevant at least in the medium term. In the next months many things will happen in the country and I am close to the hope of Nepalis and Nepal's friends that the country will soon have a new constitution. Thus, further investigation should continuously follow the happenings in the country in order to observe how the new developments will influence accountability issues.

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## Annex I: Visited locations

### *Ramechhap District (Public Review)*

As first field experience, we visited the Ramechhap District in the middle hills of the Central Region attending a Public Review. This first field visit was very short: we stayed just the day of the meeting, having yet the opportunity to hold few (formal and informal) interviews with the collaborators of the project. This first visit served mostly as a test for the methodology and for *modus operandi* of the team. The access to the field (in this case just the access to the meeting and the contact with a DDC official) was ensured by the TBSU staff.

The trail bridge links two villages perched on the steep slopes of two opposite mountains. The site is quite remote in the middle hills and the main activity is subsistence as well as cash crops agriculture. In the very short visit we could not analyse the social organisation of the village. However, we could guess a traditional organisation, with men holding a higher social position than women and with caste and ethnicity still playing an important role in the social structure. A river marks the border between the two villages but also between two different VDCs (Phulasi and Dandakharka) and DDCs (Ramechhap and Charikot). The village on the left bank (in Dandakharka VDC) is better connected to the main road, while the village on the right side (in Phulasi VDC) is linked to the main road by a very steep and rough road. The right side village is the one that more needs the trail bridge, it was the initiator of the project and it invested considerably more money and resources in the bridge construction. Dandakharka VDC and Charikot DDC participated in a very limited way to the project. Moreover, some conflicts rose when Dandakharka VDC Secretary was transferred and his successor refused to provide the money promised by his predecessor. The main implementer of the project was Ramechhap DDC. This DDC habitually works without the intermediation of Local Service Providers; instead of that, it implements directly the technical as well as the social part of the projects in the district. Thus, no Local Service Provider was involved in the trail bridge construction. The DDC decided to stop working with local NGOs because of two reasons: first, because according to the opinion of a DDC engineer the NGOs that are active in the district do not have enough qualification and capacities to implement a project. Second, again according to the engineer, because NGOs in the district were highly politicised. Beside the TBSU staff other main actors in the project were Phulasi VDC and the User Committee, composed mainly by villagers from the right side. A main issue of the Public Review we attended was the search for additional money: the actual costs of the trail bridge were higher than the estimated ones. In fact, we attended the *second* Public Review for that bridge. The bridge was already finished and a Public Audit should have taken place. However, there was a problem with the fabricator of some steel parts, who delivered material of a quality lower than promised. The (Ramechhap) DDC engineer successfully solved the problem by writing him a warning letter requesting to replace at his costs all the concerned parts with the threat of effacing him from the list of contractors working with that DDC.

### *Surkhet District (Public Hearing)*

The second field visit in the Surkhet District in the middle hills of the Western Region began with the observation of the Public Hearing, after which the two students stayed in the village for one week. The access to the community was ensured by TBSU staff, which introduced us to a man who holds a central position in the trail bridge User Committee and who became our guide in the village. Thanks to his tight organisation we could hold a high number of interviews and meetings in the very short time of our visit, not only in Ratamata (the village) but also in neighbouring villages in the same VDC (Mehelkuna). However, the presence of the man, who was very often at our side during both formal and informal interactions, strongly influenced the answers and the openness of our interlocutors. As the process of bridge construction was at the very beginning, the LSP was not strongly linked to the community yet. Therefore, the interaction with the LSP was not central in the organisation of the fieldwork.

Ratamata has many common points with the village in Ramechhap. It is also located in the middle hills, in a quite remote area. The geography of the mountains is less steep, but there is no direct road connection to the market and to the main road. A trail connects the village with the market and passes through a river that is harmless in the dry season, but dangerous in the rainy months. Ratamata is very small (around 35 households) and the very basic livelihood rests mainly on subsistence as well as cash crops agriculture. The poverty level in the village is still high; however, in the last decade several development activities took place, as for example the construction of an irrigation system, the sanitation infrastructures and the formation of many community based organisations for the collective management of local resources. It seems that the Maoist insurgency did not strongly touch Ratamata, because of its remote location and poverty. There are only few high-caste households, while the rest are low-caste ones (Dalit). The different castes are quite well integrated: Dalit personalities hold elite positions in the village. Another main characteristic of Ratamata is the very high rate of migration: very few young men were to see in the village, as most had migrated abroad and are sending more or less regularly remittance to the families. The strong migration of course has changed the social structure of the village, with women carrying many familiar and collective responsibilities at the same time. Nevertheless, the predominance of males is still strong and the few men left exercise a strong power in the community. Other villages around Ratamata will benefit from the bridge. Those other villages are bigger, better connected to communication routes and their migration rate is lower. Ratamata, being the main beneficiary of the trail bridge, was also its initiator. The main role in the project is played by the most influential man in Ratamata (our guide), a young low-caste man who made his way to gain more wealth and power and who now counts as the 'chief' of the village. The Public Hearing took place normally and without particular issues or conflicts.

#### *Chitwan District (Public Audit)*

The third field visit was the longest one: the two students stayed for around three weeks in Kumroj VDC in the Chitwan District in the Tarai flatland of the Central Region. The Public Audit took place at the end of the stay. Some daily visits to the district capital allowed us to meet LSP staff as well as a journalist and one of the DDC officials responsible for the trail bridge. The access to the field was ensured by the direct contact with the LSP, which had a very tight contact with, and knowledge about, the community. The LSP introduced us to two men who were playing a central role in the trail bridge project. Both men were our key persons in the village, but one in particular was our guide and is at the same time one of the most influential people in Kumroj. Contrarily to the previous experience, the role of the guide was much more limited: apart from providing us some contacts and from organising few meetings, he did not interfere in the interviews and interactions with local people. However, people of the village knew about our tight contact with him, which could in some way influence their answers and limit their openness to us.

The context in Chitwan is very different from the previous two. Kumroj VDC is situated in the Tarai flatland in the South of the country and is very near to the Chitwan National Park, which brings to the region (and to Kumroj) many tourists every day. Being on a flatland, the whole region enjoys good communication facilities, electricity facilities, irrigation facilities and other 'modern' comforts; moreover, the land is fertile and there is good water supply. The agriculture, which is the main income source in the region, is much more modernised than the traditional one in the hills. Tourism is another important income source for local authorities, for community organisations as well as for the single households. Kumroj VDC, with more than 800 households, does not present a very high poverty rate, but still about 30 percent of the population is living with a food sufficiency of less than six months (data from the VDC). The education level is higher than in the middle hills and many young people continue their studies after the compulsory school. The village and its neighbourhood enjoyed in the past and still enjoy a large amount of development aid from outside. This aid comes both from regular governmental and non-governmental organisations (including HELVETAS) and from donations and projects by individual tourists. The high number of

'social work'<sup>19</sup> projects and activities creates in the village a tight network between people working in such activities: single people cover various positions in various projects. In that way social work, beside the traditional differences of caste/ethnicity, gender, age, education and economic status, represents in the village an important variable of the social organisation of the community. During the Maoist insurgency, combatants regularly visited the village in order to collect food and other crucial resources. Part of the village elite was threatened and had to flee away from the village. Those people could come back to the village only after the end of the civil war. Who did not flee stayed in the village, but had to stop all social work activities, in addition to paying high amounts of money.

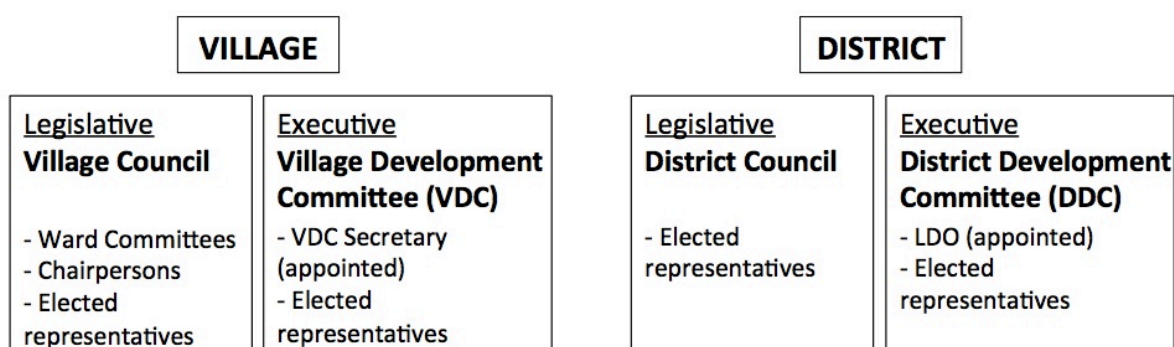
The story of the trail bridge is long and confused. A bridge in the same location of 'our' trail bridge should have been built already some years ago. The project had already been approved, but for some reasons the bridge was 'shifted' to another location, but still in Kumroj VDC. After some years, an influencing man of the community (who was also our guide and donated the land for the bridge on the right bank) together with some friends applied for a trail bridge in the actual location. In fact, a cemented bridge would have been more appreciated by the population (on both sides a carriageable road ends on the river where is located the trail bridge), but it was easier to get funds for a trail bridge. Finally, a trail bridge was built to link Kumroj VDC with the other (right) bank (Bachhyauli VDC), where important facilities are available (school, market). Bachhyauli VDC felt less the need for the bridge: the most important benefit is the link with a nearer health post in Kumroj VDC. The User Committee was composed mostly by people from Kumroj: members from Bachhyauli often did not participate to the meetings. The construction of the bridge lasted three years. The long construction time was due to a more difficult technique, but also to some delays in the delivering of the promised budget by the DDC as well as problems with the material delivered by the fabricator. Indeed, the delivered material was different to the booked one and needed to be changed. During the Public Audit, beside the traditional presentation of the final work and the creation of the Bridge Maintenance Committee, these problems were presented and explained to the public.

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<sup>19</sup> Intended as per definition in footnote 11.

## Annex II: Governance structure in Nepal

<b>Local</b>	<b>WARD</b>	It is the smallest institutional entity. Electors at ward level select their representatives in the Ward Committee, which does not have administrative authority but only defined roles in the planning process.
	<b>VILLAGE</b>	Also generally called VDC, it is normally composed of nine Wards: the Village Council, composed by the Ward Committees' chairpersons, is the legislative body. The Village Development Committee (VDC) is the executive and autonomous local body and is lead by elected representatives. In addition to them the VDC Secretary, who is also part of the VDC, is not elected but appointed by the central government. The VDC is the smallest body with administrative authority, decision power about the allocation of resources and right to collect taxes. In urban areas the VDC is substituted by the Municipality with similar structure, roles, responsibilities and authority.
	<b>ILAKA</b>	It gathers many VDCs, but has only an advisory role.
	<b>DISTRICT</b>	Also generally called DDC, it is the next level and is organised with a similar structure like the Village. The District Council is the legislative body and the District Development Committee (DDC) is the executive one; the Local Development Officer (LDO, the correspondent of the VDC Secretary) is appointed by the central government.
<b>National</b>	<b>DEVELOPMENT REGION</b>	Like the Ilaka, it does not have administrative authority.
	<b>CENTRAL GOVERNMENT</b>	Together with its Ministries it represents the last administrative level.



### Annex III: The steps of the Public Audit Practice

	<b>PUBLIC HEARING (PH)</b>	<b>PUBLIC REVIEW (PR)</b>	<b>PUBLIC AUDIT (PA)</b>
<i>Chronology</i>	During the planning phase of the project.	During the implementation phase of the project. It usually takes place once, but can be repeated if necessary.	It is the last step of the project.
<i>Facilitator</i>	Local Service Provider	User Committee	User Committee
<i>Content</i>	Information about the planned activities, the planned costs and funding, the necessary participation of the community in terms of work and money, the role and responsibilities of the different stakeholders and other basic data are discussed. The aim of PH is to inform the community about the project, integrate its opinion and requirements in the planning and develop a common understanding among all the stakeholders before starting the actual work.	The aim of the PR is to assess the progress and performance of all the stakeholders, to inform the community about the state of the works and budget and to discuss possible problems that arise during the implementation.	It marks the end of the project with the approbation by the community from technical, social, managerial and financial perspective. The planning of the steps following the completion of the project (e.g. Bridge Maintenance Committee) is also an issue of PA.

(see HELVETAS Switzerland n.d.a)



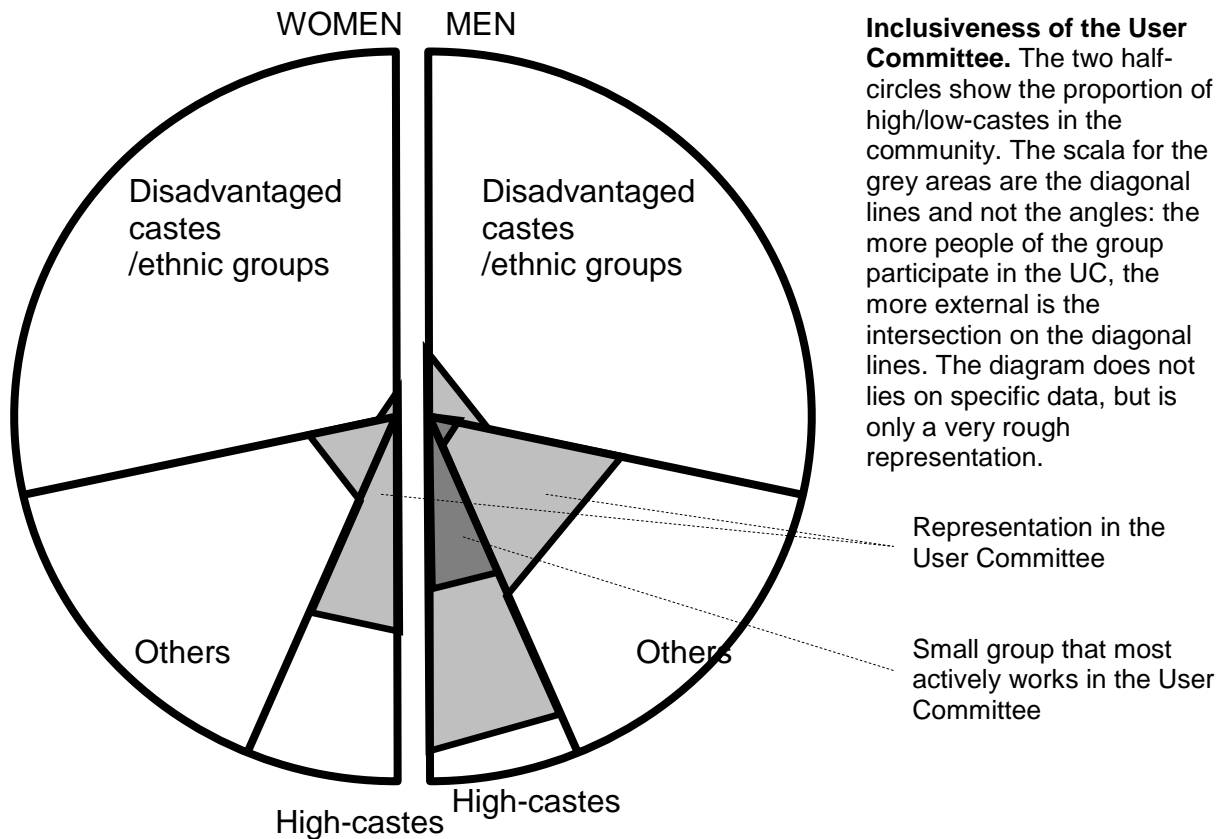
## Annex IV: Trail bridge construction process

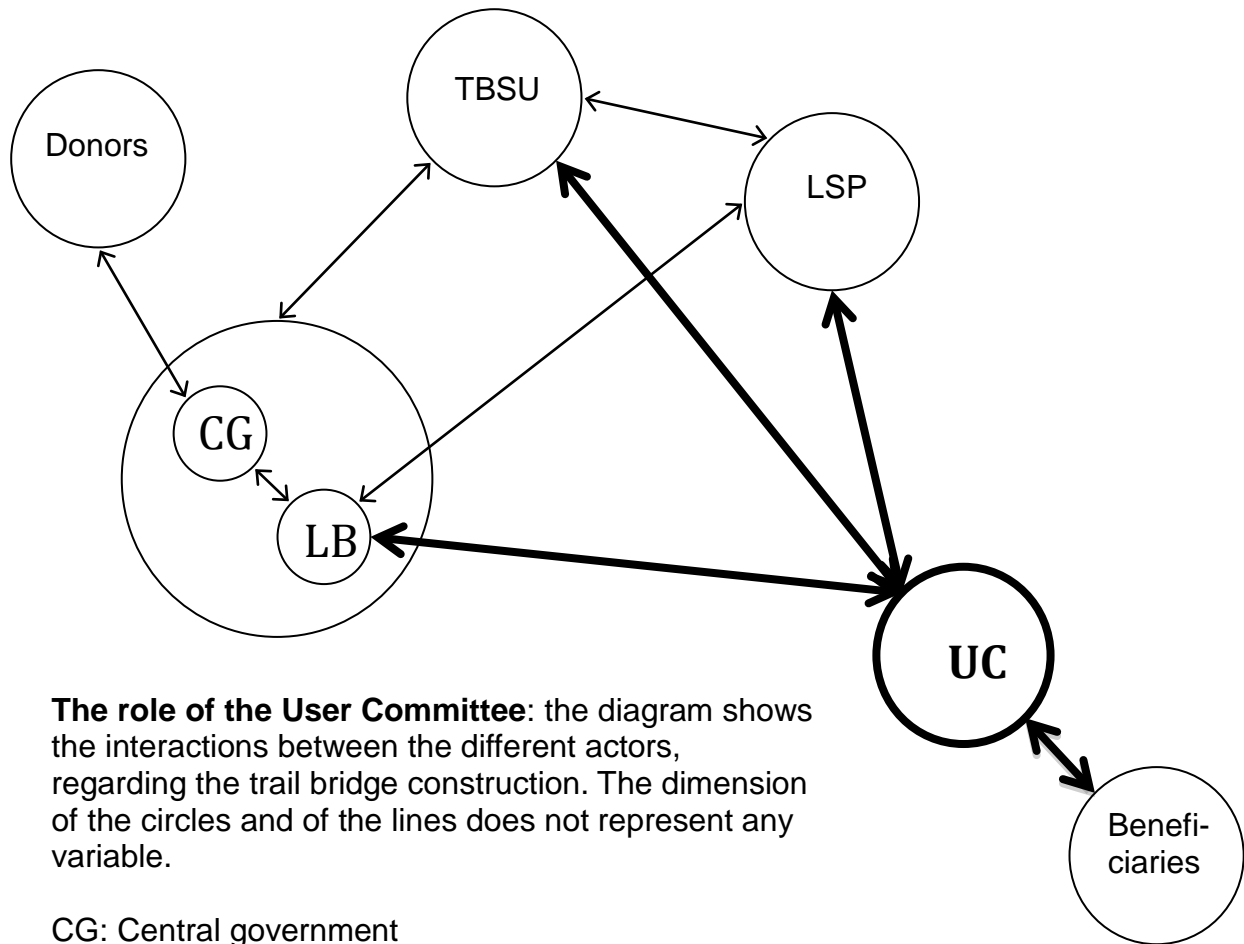
In the following table are presented the steps for the construction of a trail bridge, with particular attention on the actors involved and their roles and responsibilities (HELVETAS Nepal 2006b).

<b>A</b>	A community applies for a trail bridge and sends the request to the DDC through the VDC.
<b>B</b>	The DDC collects all applications and compiles a prioritised list of possible trail bridges.
<b>C</b>	The DDC lists are sent to the central Department, which compiles a prioritised list, too.
<b>D</b>	In the selected bridge locations, a Local Service Provider (LSP) is hired by the DDC (together with TBSU) to provide technical and social support.
<b>E</b>	After the feasibility studies by the LSP together with TBSU, a Public Hearing is organised by the LSP.
<b>F</b>	The Bridge User Committee (UC) is formed mostly during the Public Hearing.
<b>G</b>	The UC will be responsible for the bridge for the whole duration of the works, continuously supported technically and socially by the LSP and punctually technically by the TBSU. The latter supports the government with technical assistance at the central and local level.
<b>H</b>	The VDC, after the process of application, does not have an active role in the bridge construction: its task is to provide the accorded money in time.
<b>I</b>	Contrarily to the VDC, the DDC plays an important role during the whole bridge construction: it has, of course, to provide the accorded budget (transferred to it by the central government from the fund basket of the Swap), but also technical support to the UC through the engineers of the District Technical Office (DTO) and it has to manage the acquisition of specialised material by external fabricators. Moreover, the DTO monitors the bridge construction throughout the project cycle.
<b>J</b>	The community has to provide its support through (partially paid) labour and material.
<b>K</b>	One or more Public Review is held during the works and are organised by the UC with the support of the LSP.
<b>L</b>	Finally, the UC, always with the support of the LSP, organises the Public Audit for the completion of the project.

## Annex V: The role of the user committee

The first diagram shows how, despite inclusiveness *on paper*, the *meaningful* participation in the user committee is often limited to high caste men. The second diagram simplifies the relations between the different actors and shows the intermediary position of the user committee, between the community of beneficiaries and the other actors. The arrows represent interactions that regard the trail bridge project. Of course, local bodies, the TBSU and the LSP also interact with the beneficiaries, but the arrows are not sketched because this interaction is mostly limited to the specific space of the Public Audit Practice (and in the case of LSP to the very first phase of the project).





**The role of the User Committee:** the diagram shows the interactions between the different actors, regarding the trail bridge construction. The dimension of the circles and of the lines does not represent any variable.

CG: Central government  
 LB: Local bodies