

Learning from the positive

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**LEARNING FROM THE POSITIVE TO REDUCE RURAL POVERTY:
INSTITUTIONAL INNOVATIONS IN AGRICULTURAL AND NATURAL
RESOURCES RESEARCH AND DEVELOPMENT¹**

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SUMMARY

This paper argues that opportunities for reducing poverty, improving social inclusion, and influencing policy and institutional changes are being missed as a result of not learning sufficiently from development practitioners who have been effective in bringing about positive changes in the past. Cautionary tales, positive deviance, innovations systems and aid ethnographic literature are reviewed. Three agricultural and natural-resources case studies of positive experiences are described: (1) the spread of bamboo tubewells in eastern Bihar; (2) changes in rice research policy and institutions in Nepal; and (3) the spread of groups and group-based organisations and federations in Nepal. Implications for innovations theory and rural development are discussed. A key finding is that effective innovation in the policy and institutional arenas is generally location and time specific. This has significant implications for rural development policies and practices; especially those concerning the scaling up of technology and institutional models.

INTRODUCTION

In recent years there has been a growing interest in how agricultural and natural-resources projects and programmes can be made more effective in reducing rural poverty, increasing social inclusion, and influencing policy and institutional change. This interest is illustrated by concerns with methods for the scaling up of technology, the promotion of best practices, manuals and workshops on learning and change, new action-research projects and policy studies to investigate, develop and test new approaches and procedures. Much of this thinking is couched within the framework that development is a rational linear, problem-solving exercise. While there are many studies which have critiqued this view of development, it is still the dominant framework used in development policy and research discourses. This paper is not a further critique of the dominant framework, or a denial that the framework is not useful on occasions. Rather, it suggests that development opportunities are being missed by not placing more emphasis on learning from positive situations. The idea is simple: learn from the positive. This involves purposely seeking out and learning from past and contemporary political/cultural situations where positive things have already occurred, and learning from the way different actors were effective in bringing about positive changes. The entry point for this analysis is finding situations where there is empirical evidence that positive changes have already taken place. This is a very different entry point from much mainstream poverty and social exclusion analysis where the preoccupation is either with (1) describing how bad a situation is (the problem), what are the barriers and constraints to change, and then suggesting solutions, or (2) learning mainly from earlier, planned development interventions. Learning from the positive does not discard learning from the outcomes of past planned interventions; however, it opens up the possibility of looking for different things in new places. Consequently, learning from the positive is a more inclusive approach than just learning from past development intervention success (or failure) studies.

PLANNED REFLECTION, LEARNING AND CHANGE IS OFTEN DIFFICULT AND PROBLEMATIC

One of the reasons for suggesting that learning from the positive should be given more attention is that formal learning and change is notoriously difficult and problematic. The idea of learning and change in development work is certainly not new. As part of the management guides for project and policy cycles there has always been a formal monitoring and evaluation (M&E), learning and change element. However, the problems of getting M&E procedures implemented are well documented (Biggs and Smith, 2003) and persistent, and well illustrated by a recent World Bank publication on good practice where it said 'M&E systems have been weak in World Bank Agricultural Knowledge & Information Systems and the AKIS programmes that they support' (Alex and Byerlee, 2001, p. v). This is in spite of the Bank being one of the primary promoters of project management and M&E manuals for over 30 years.

There is a rich literature that documents that formal efforts to bring about learning and change is difficult. For example, the promotion of gender analysis and participation in the CGIAR system (Gurung and Mentor, 2004), poverty-focused client-oriented on-farm research in national research and extension systems (Merrill-Sands *et al.*, 1989), planning and M&E methods in agricultural research and extension systems (Horton *et al.*, 2000), and the promotion of interdisciplinary perspectives in international natural-resources research (Rhoades, 2005). A review of some natural-resources research projects of the U.K. Department for International Development (DFID) indicates that many of the same problems persist despite all of the previous reviews, recommendations and plans for action (Lenne and Thomas, 2005).

In response to this problematic nature of learning and change on the part of organizations and actors in natural-resources R&D systems, there is a growing literature that investigates the reasons for these outcomes. Again we find that such investigations are not new. For example, in the 1970s in a small book of cautionary tales, Thomas (1975) investigated why irrigation policy and practice in Bangladesh promoted major canals and deep tubewells, when technical and economic development analysis suggested using far cheaper surface water sources and shallow tubewells. In much the same vein, there is a growing literature of ethnographic analysis of development situations. However, many of these studies, like cautionary tales, appear to concentrate on finding and understanding negative situations rather than investigating the positive (Rossi, 2004).

LEARNING FROM THE POSITIVE

Learning from the positive also is not a new idea. However, Sternin (2004) has summarized the approach succinctly by suggesting that we learn from the behaviour of those people who give rise to positive deviance. If you think of a statistical distribution, there are observations either side of an average. Why not investigate and learn from the situations that give rise to the observations that lie on the positive side of the curve? This was done by Judith Tender (1997) in a part of Brazil where many positive things were happening, whereas in the surrounding districts there was

widespread corruption and nepotism. Significantly, she concluded that if the development actors at the time had used the current ‘best practice’ manuals to guide their work, then in all probability many of these positive outcomes would not have come about. In Bangladesh in the early 1970s a great deal of innovative development activity was taking place in rural areas. The Ministry of Rural Development coordinated study teams to quickly investigate what was happening, how and why, and what could be learnt for those development initiatives (Yunus and Latifee, 1975). There has been a long tradition of learning from successes (Messerschmidt, 1988; Jain 1994; Uphoff *et al.*, 1997). Learning from the positive has much in common with the intent of these studies. However, it is broader than the development success literature, which sometimes is preoccupied with understanding the success of planned policies, programmes and projects. Another similar type of work comes from the early promoters of a national innovations systems approach. They based their advocacy on a study of why Japan had been so successful in developing its economy after World War II (Freeman, 1987). In the natural-resources arena, there is a growing literature that seeks to understand past positive innovation processes (Douthwaite, 2002; Hall *et al.*, 2004; Biggs and Messerschmidt, 2005; Van Mele, 2005). A strong advocacy in guides on appreciative inquiry methods for development practitioners is the need to be appreciative of what people are already doing (Hammond and Royal, 1998).

COMPARATIVE CASE STUDY METHODOLOGY

To explore what can be learnt from examining positive deviant situations, three case studies were purposely selected. They have been chosen with the following criteria in mind. First, they are from different times: one describes an innovation process that took place in Bihar over 30 years ago, and the others look at more recent times. The older case study is included to show that some processes of change have relevance to contemporary political economy contexts. Second, to show that criteria for assessing ‘success’ and ‘positive’ change are always difficult and problematic, as well as being time specific. Third, I was present in the locations where these changes were taking place, but not a significant actor in what was happening. Thus, I am aware of some of the broader contextual, political, economic and cultural issues in which these case studies are embedded. In addition, I have also had a chance to reflect and look back on what was happening in a more detached reflective way. Four, the case studies are sufficiently documented in public-domain literature to make them empirically based and credible. Fifth, empirical evidence suggests that these were changing social situations where, by contemporary development criteria, positive outcomes were occurring. Sixth, they illustrate especially processes of institutional innovation at the macro policy and institutional level that relate directly to issues of the ‘scaling up’ of technology, models of micro institutions, and new research and development methods. Seven, they illustrate where significant institutional and policy innovations were not foreseen as part of planned development and intervention activity.

Spread of bamboo tubewells in Bihar

The first case study is taken from Eastern Bihar in the early 1970s—one of the poorest and most socially differentiated parts of rural India. Very large family

holdings existed side by side with smaller holdings and sharecroppers. Over 50% of the rural households were landless labourer households, many of whom were obligated to larger landowners in debt and other ways. The main irrigation emphasis in the region was the canal system associated with the Kosi barrage. In the late 1960s, the government sponsored a minor irrigation programme promoting a package of technology of a shallow steel tubewell and a pump set. To be eligible for government credit, farmers had to sign up for the fixed package. What actually happened as regards the spread of irrigation was a very different outcome from what the planners had in mind (Appu, 1974; Clay, 1980). Essentially rural innovators, some research-minded farmers, artisans, traders, landless labourers started to unpack the package and created new technology and institutions. One of the most interesting technical innovations was the bamboo tubewell: artisans made low-cost bamboo tubewells and sank several of them for farmers who had scattered plots. Pump sets were mounted on bullock carts to serve several bamboo tubewells. Alongside this, institutional innovations took place and markets for pumping and water quickly developed. It was not long before the bamboo tubewells were irrigating more land than the government canal irrigation system. As regards making irrigation water available to farmers where and when it was wanted, the spread of the bamboo tubewell was a success. It helped improve rural livelihoods for the poor by increasing employment for landless households. Because of the service markets for water and pumping and the smaller scale of the technology, it was more accessible to smaller farms and sharecroppers. Reasons for including this case study are that it is not only an example informal R&D by people in rural communities, but also of innovation at the policy and macro institutional level. The Kosi District Commissioner, when he saw these new technical and institutional innovations spreading, organised a special programme for their promotion. This was no easy task. At the time, development thinking in India was dominated by the top-down promotion of 'one size fits all' and 'best practice' packages. Bureaucracies were created and instructed to manage such programmes. Not only did the commissioner effectively promote the bamboo technology and water and pumping markets in his region, but he also had a much wider impact on informing irrigation policy and practice in the country as a whole. This was by getting an article published in the most widely read and influential policy and development information sheet in the country, the *Economic and Political Weekly* (Appu, 1974). The fact that the paper was written by an innovative bureaucrat made it all the more influential because it was written in a style and in the language that was in use among planners, policy-makers and development practitioners at the time. While the 'scaling up' of the bamboo tubewell technology took place mainly in the private sector, the rate of its spread was increased as a result of the social entrepreneurial behaviour of a public-sector actor, who created macro-level institutional innovations which were relevant and effective in the local political, technical, cultural and economic environment.

The analysis and documentation of this positive innovation process in Bihar also helped to change irrigation policy Bangladesh towards the promotion of shallow tubewell technology and the promotion of water and service markets. However, these positive outcomes now have to be put in a broader context, as it is now realized that the water from different types of shallow tubewells has given rise to widespread arsenic poisoning.

Policy changes and institutional innovation in the Nepal rice improvement system

A second case study is taken from Nepal. This is a case where, almost unwittingly, a project had major positive effects on bringing about significant changes in research policy and the institutional structures in the national agricultural research and extension system.

In late 1997, a client-oriented participatory crop improvement (PCI) project was started in Nepal. It was designed to adapt and develop cost-effective methods for improving rice varieties available to farmers in high-potential agro-climatic conditions. The project was premised on the grounds that on the Nepal *terai* (plains) most of the grain grown by farmers was sold and that the region was relatively uniform as regards physical and socioeconomic conditions. An eye-opener for the project staff in the first year was a farmer livelihood analysis that showed not only a great deal of variation in agro-climatic conditions, but also great diversity in social economic characteristics: many households were food deficient and many poor cultivators came from socially excluded groups. This survey was originally seen as a benchmark and data-collection study to assess the project's impact at the end of the project. However, in reality it turned out to be a poverty monitoring survey. In this case it also monitored the project's assumptions and claims to development relevance. At about the same time, the main outside funding agency, DFID, was placing greater emphasis on poverty reduction and livelihoods improvements. The project staff changed the project (and log frame) significantly at that point. The project continued annually to monitor poverty conditions and project impacts at the village level. The poverty-reduction impacts have been high and well documented, and the estimates of economic rates of return to the project have been high (Joshi *et al.*, 2006). However, the project had a far wider range of positive policy and institutional impacts that were not envisaged in the original project design. These were:

(1) The formal recognition of the informal R&D system on the *terai*, and the creation of mechanisms for using information from this system in the formal R&D system. A longstanding problem for the government rice-improvement programme had been how to acknowledge and assess varieties that continuously came over the very long open border with India through farmer-to-farmer, trader and other exchanges, and how to encourage the assessment of varieties and other new technologies coming out of informal R&D.

(2) Changes in the National Varietal Release Procedures. These changes allowed data from non-government research institutions and farmers to be used in making national release and varietal promotion decisions.

(3) Creation of methods for effective government, NGO and farmer collaboration at the village level and, more importantly, at higher institutional levels. After local district agricultural officers, NGO staff and farmers had been working together 'informally' in the early years, they drew up more formal Letters of Agreement (LOAs). These new institutions gave rise to the legitimization of such LOAs throughout the agricultural research and extension system. This was no mean task in an environment of much hostility between these types of actors.

(4) Creating methods and institutional arrangements for extending the participatory plant breeding and seed production approach to all the major rice-

growing districts and several hill districts. Significantly, the way the ‘scaling up’ took place was opportunistic, in the sense that the project originally had no plan for ‘scaling up’; however, the local project staff contacted staff in parallel government programmes and jointly developed new partnerships. Again no mean task in an institutional environment where different aid agencies, government departments, NGOs still pursued their own agendas with hierarchical management structures, and all too often gave only lip-service to creating effective lateral and horizontal institutional linkages.

From a policy and long-term institutional reform perspective, these are very important outcomes. However, they were not seen as goals of the original project. Furthermore, almost all of the policy and institutional changes came about as a result of the social entrepreneurship and innovative behaviour of the local project staff. With national policy and institutional change in their minds, they sought out and took opportunities as they came along. To a large degree, only they knew enough about the power relationships in the policy and development arenas to see and know opportunities when they arose. Almost without exception, effective actions in the policy and institutional arenas were never planned (i.e. they were not in the annual work plan based on the log frame); however, once shown to be an effective way forward, the log frame and annual plans were changed accordingly each year. In the project, there was a culture of continuous institutional innovation. In this regard, it is important to note that this continued to be in a pro-poor direction, as the project staff decided to work more with poorer and marginalized groups and with local NGOs who concentrated on social inclusion and empowerment issues.

Groups and group-based organizations and federations in Nepal

The third study concerns an overall review of groups and group-based organizations in Nepal. This exploratory study focused on building on the positive, and was undertaken as part of a larger Gender and Social Exclusion Assessment for the National Planning Commission, DFID and the World Bank¹. Different types of customary (indigenous and traditional) groups have always existed in Nepal. In recent years, these have been augmented by sponsored, outsider-initiated groups. The way groups interact and are managed reflects the local political, cultural, economic and technical environment. The promotion and sponsorship of groups has been the major implementation instrument of all government, donor, NGO and other development agencies. There are forest-user groups, micro-credit groups, irrigation-user groups, healthcare-user groups, road- and bridge-building groups, farmer field schools, non-formal education groups, micro hydro and many more types of sponsored groups. We attempted to estimate the number of mainly sponsored groups and reckoned it was at least 400 000 in 2004. In Nepal, development groups can be placed in three main categories: (1) common property management (CPM) groups—these would be forest-user groups, surface and tubewell irrigation groups, micro-hydro groups, etc.; (2) service delivery groups—these would be the micro-credit groups, healthcare-user groups etc.; and (3) social mobilization groups—these are groups form around specific social issues, for example, land rights, abolition of

¹ This section is based on Biggs *et al.* (2005).

bonded labour, squatters' rights. While there is considerable overlap between these categories, the agencies that promote them normally concentrate on one main function as a focus for their work. In the study, we were particularly interested in groups and group-based organizations that had given rise to positive outcomes, as regards poverty reduction, gender, social inclusion, and effective sustainable voice and influence in the macro policy and institutional arenas.

In the study, we found a great array of outcomes occurred after groups had been sponsored at the village level. Different types of federations, cooperatives, informal groupings, etc. had emerged. There was tremendous diversity in the structures of the higher-level institutional models found in Nepal. There was no single federation model, or 'natural evolution' of federation/cooperative development, or any pre-planned, formulaic process. Sometimes a federation process was planned by an agency, as was the case with the Production Credit for Rural Women; however, even in this case, some of the most interesting outcomes of the project were the ways other federation and empowerment activities were initiated by local people (KC, 2003). In the case of the community integrated pest management (IPM) project, there were no plans for any federation process; however, women's farmer field schools (FFSs) federated in an informal way to take collective action to purchase inputs together and demand improved services from government extension officers. In some cases this led to them registering as a legal cooperative. At the national level, farmers and others who had been trained to teach IPM in FFSs using experiential learning methods formed an national association. This was a response to try to maintain standards of training, as the staff of many other agencies were starting to call any village-level training with farmers an FFS. Again, this important institutional innovation was totally outside the original project design.

In complete contrast, in some cases a federation was formed first and group formation came second. This was the situation of the Society for Preservation of Shelters and Habitation in Nepal (SPOSH-Nepal). At first, SPOSH campaigned for squatters' rights, and then members of SPOSH started working with settlement groups called unit committees. After that, district committees were formed. In addition, we found there was no general rule that government agencies or NGOs or activists or people in the private sector were the leaders of federation processes. Cooperatives are not traditionally seen as vehicles of promoting the interests of poorer people or excluded groups in Nepal. However, we found some women's fisher groups (generally an excluded ethnic group) and women's vegetable-marketing groups were using the cooperative legislation as part of their activities for collective action and changing local power structures. Sometimes ambiguous legislation existed concerning the registering of groups and federations, but this did not deter effective institutional innovators as they saw this as part of the reality of the institutional landscape, which had to be navigated in one way or another and sometimes this meant having to be effective in getting the legislation changed.

The research on groups in Nepal also highlighted the problematical nature of what constitutes 'success' in development discourse. For some observers, the spread of formally registered forest-user groups and the formation of a powerful national Federation of Community Forest Users, Nepal (FECUFUN), with a membership of about 13 000 groups in 2004, represented a great success, as it has led to the better management of forests in Nepal. For others, who look at whether the very poor and

traditionally socially excluded groups have gained from these developments, the picture is not so good—in some situations, the forest-user groups have led to increased poverty and social exclusion.

The overwhelming evidence from the 12 positive case studies examined was that effective institutional innovations came from actors in the local political and cultural contexts. When and if outside institutional models (or parts of them) were useful, it was because they were assessed by ‘insiders’ as being relevant in the local political–cultural setting for helping to bring about change in power structure. In addition, there were no ‘spontaneous developments’, ‘hidden hands’ or ‘natural’ evolutionary processes that gave rise to institutional innovations and change. There were continuous political/cultural battles taking place, with effective people and coalitions taking actions to bring about changes in power structure.

ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

Are there general lessons that can be learnt from these case studies, or are they just anecdotal stories? I think there are some generalities that can be drawn out. They are grouped under lessons for innovation theory and lessons for rural development practice.

Innovation theory and practice

Institutional innovation processes are different from technical innovation processes. What the case studies show is that major and significant institutional innovations were coming up all the time from within the local context. Informal, unplanned R&D was always taking place. Local actors and coalitions were finding new ways to adapt and change old and new technologies and institutions. Existing power structures were being effectively challenged and changed. Even when new institutional models and technologies were developed under special conditions, or introduced from outside, they were generally modified and changed by local actors so as to make them effective in the local context. In addition, and significantly, in ‘scaling up’ processes, it was the local institutional innovations that were the critical elements that gave rise to the way the technology or institutional model was scaled up and to the pattern of outcomes as regards who benefited from the process. Consequently, for those concerned with being effective in poverty reduction and social inclusion, the most important research starts at the so called ‘scaling up’ stage. Scaling up is not a minor ‘development’ job to be done at the end of an R&D pipeline. At a superficial level it might appear that ways for scaling up new models for conducting participatory research, or new models for micro finance or new types of forest-user groups and cooperatives, can be drawn up in a straightforward managerial way. However, all our case studies show that local institutional innovations were central to the actual way scaling up and federation processes took place, and who benefited. Institutional innovation in the local context is not in any way similar to the ‘adaptation’ to local circumstances of outside technical introductions. The radical programme for the promotion of bamboo tubewell groundwater irrigation in Bihar flew in the face of all conventional irrigation planning at the time. These case studies therefore seriously question any innovation

theories that suggest there is a linear process of research, development, testing, scaling up and adoption of technology or new institutions. Consequently, any analysis of technology and institutional change without a full description of the historical context and role of different political, economic and institutional actors in which the change took place is not very useful for those who might want to draw out generalities or learn other lessons. This is especially so for institutional innovations that effectively changed power structures and resulted in poverty reduction and increased social inclusion.

Location and time specificity of institutional innovations. Some wheels are always being reinvented—and have to be. This does not mean they are any less important institutional innovations. The significance of institutional innovations can only be understood with reference to the time, place, culture and political context in which they are taking place. The creation and subsequent spread of the letter of agreement (LOA) in the rice innovation system in Nepal is in some senses not a new idea. Letters of agreement, memoranda of understanding, etc. are the very stock-in-trade of development activities. However, here the specific nature of the LOA, the way it evolved, who created and developed it in the local government district offices of Nepal, meant that it was an important local innovation. At the time of its creation and use, respect and collaboration among government officials, NGOs and poorer farmers was not widespread. This institutional innovation provided a relevant and viable way forward. The fact that the format for the LOA has now spread within many parts of the government structure is evidence of its usefulness. However, although the method has spread, even in the context of the PCI project the collaboration of the 25 *terai* district government officers with local and international partners is not all based on LOAs. Except for the Chitwan district, where this institutional innovation started, all other collaborations are based on informal collaboration and networking, as it is felt that, in terms of sustainability in the current political and institutional context (currently there is a state of emergency in Nepal), this type of informality is more sustainable than formal LOAs.

Multiple sources of innovation. These case studies provide ample evidence that important technical and institutional innovations arise from multiple sources. Important innovations do not necessarily come from planned and directed research, and then get passed on to development agencies for promotion and scaling up. Varieties of rice used by farmers on the *terai* came from research stations, from farmer informal R&D systems, from joint farmer–researcher activities, and from multiple other sources. The pumps used in the spread of the bamboo tubewells came from outside sources, while the bamboo tubewell, the innovation of mounting a pump on a bullock cart, the selling of pumping services, and the institutional innovations created for the ‘scaling up’ process all came from within the local social and cultural environment. It could be argued that, even when innovations come from outside, it is the local institutional innovations that are the most important, as it is those that facilitate more widespread use.

Temporary contending coalitions of actors. In all cases, there were formal and informal temporary coalitions of actors who worked together to confront and

challenge existing power structures and orthodoxies of habitual and formulaic behaviour. The terms of reference for the Kosi development officer in Bihar in the early 1970s was to support, coordinate and help implement the policies and programmes of line ministries. One of these was the programme for minor irrigation and the promotion of the shallow tubewells package. In this case, the Kosi commissioner did quite the opposite, and in formal and informal ways joined up with a whole range of new partners from different organizations as well as farmers, artisans and others from the private sector. The transparent way he went about this was reflected in part by the article in the *Economic and Political Weekly*. He used this method as part of the strategy to question and effectively challenge the power structures of existing orthodoxies in the irrigation sector. In Nepal, the way the rice-breeding NGO formed formal and informal alliances with some senior government personnel in the rice plant breeding establishment resulted in long-term and significant changes in Nepal's agricultural research policies and development practices. The growth of the powerful forest-user group federation (FECOFUN) came about as part of a coalition of actors. In this process, an outside agency (the Ford Foundation) provided major funding. However, not even the opponents of FECOFUN would say this was a Ford Foundation-created institution. Ford Foundation was a member of the coalition, but certainly the staff of the Foundation were not the drivers of the change. The drivers were FECOFUN staff who thought strategically and saw the Foundation as a possible source of useful support. One of the reasons for calling these temporary coalitions is because coalition members change as internal and external conditions change. This was illustrated in the PCI rice project as the staff increasingly worked on poverty-reduction and social-inclusion issues, and in the Bihar irrigation case, where the Kosi commissioner changed the partners he worked with on irrigation issues.

Transparency on the ground. A theme coming out of these case studies is that there was transparency on the ground about what was happening in all the local contexts. In the case of the rice-breeding programme in Nepal, the ever-changing log frame provided a transparent document which all the major funding, government and NGO actors had access to. Members of the project were well known and actively engaged in the government's annual crops workshops. At the village level, project staff were transparent in their work. In the case of the bamboo tubewells, anyone visiting the Kosi region could see the bamboo irrigation technology spreading, and could talk to labourers, artisans, the distinct commissioner and others about what was happening as a result of the spread of the bamboo tubewells. In this case, the innovation was widely discussed as a result of the article published by an articulate bureaucrat. In the case of group study, we found that there was virtually no material we reported on that had not appeared in some public way—in newspapers, articles, books, etc. Consequently, these cases support the view that studies of positive situations can be undertaken, and there is no lack of information available and accessible.

Central role of agency and personal behaviour. In all cases, the agency of people and specific groups was in evidence. Things did not just happen. Nowhere was there a 'spontaneous' diffusion, a 'natural evolution' or just 'market forces'

were ‘naturally’ propelling social change. In all cases, people were making decisions and taking action. There were local heroes², but this did not appear to be as a result of having been on a ‘leadership’ course. They were finding ways to facilitate processes of positive social and technical change. Most of the local heroes had a long background (both personally and professionally) of trying to be effective in promoting poverty-reduction and social-justice issues. In their approach there was never a case of saying it was ‘someone else’s job’ to think through the consequences of the technical and social innovations they were involved in creating and promoting. If other work needed to be done, they were effective in getting suitable actors into the coalition.

Rural development practice

There are a number of practical development implications that follow from the case studies and discussion so far.

Attitudes towards development interventions. The main thrust of this paper is that there are always positive changes taking place in situations where widespread poverty and social exclusion exist. A choice for policy and development personnel is whether they search out, monitor, learn from, support and promote these situations, or whether they choose to do other things. While it might seem sensible to build on the positive, it would appear that this is not always done in development circles. The first practical lesson from our findings is that individuals have a choice as to whether they want to learn from and build on the positive. If they do, then, if the behaviour of any of the actors we have reviewed is to be followed, they will have to seek out and find room to manoeuvre. They will need to continuously look ‘outside of the box’ and ‘over the fence’ and be strategic in order to be effective.

Flexibility to encourage and support building on the positive. ‘This short history should not be viewed as a “project”, or a pre-determined sequence of activities. In 1997, the Plant Protection Directorate and FAO reached agreement on a set of broad goals and plans for the initial activities. Subsequent activities were planned year by year, taking account of the results, which had been achieved, and the emerging needs and opportunities. In this way the IPM program in Nepal has “evolved” at a rate which was quicker than anybody expected, and it has taken a shape which could not have been predicted five years ago’ (Bartlett, 2002, p. 16).

This summary of a review of a recent IPM farmer field school project in Nepal could be used to describe many of the reasons for the positive outcomes of our case study of participatory rice improvement and plant breeding. To some extent they were both the right projects in the right place at the right time (Westendorp and Biggs, 2003). Both projects were part of a wave of participatory projects that were capitalizing on the work of many earlier development interventions. In the rice

² For a description of local heroes effectively promoting gender issues in micro-credit situations, see Goetz (1996), and in a wide range of groups and group-based situations in Nepal, see Biggs *et al.* (2005).

project, it was significant that the project staff were able to completely change the project in the first year and were able to continue to change the direction of the project towards poverty-reduction and social-inclusion goals as it proceeded. A common theme in all our case studies is that research and development practitioners had flexibility to search for new opportunities in furthering the overarching goals of the project and to take action very quickly.

Broadening monitoring to include positive deviance analysis. At the project level, this would mean asking questions like: What important and significant socially-responsible things have been taking place in the project, that were the unplanned and unforeseen opportunities that arose that project staff took advantage of? What actions were taken? Another question that might be asked is: Over the last year, what have you learnt from other projects—even in other sectors—in the same region, or in the same type of work, that contain ideas, institutions or technology which are more relevant to your project overall goals, than some of the activities you now have in your project? How have you already capitalized on this information and perhaps changed your project significantly?

Production and circulation of ethnographies of positive case studies. As we noted earlier, there is a growing ethnographic literature and, although some of this looks at positive situations, much of it appears concerned with the negative. A practical suggestion is that more ethnographic studies on positive deviance should be undertaken and circulated. We are not speaking here about project- or donor-sponsored write ups of planned development intervention ‘successes’, which might become the basis for guidelines of ‘best practices’. Neither are we thinking about studies that are conducted in order to attract future funding, or to show that there has been value for money. While on some occasions this type of activity might serve a useful purpose, what is being spoken about here are research studies that look in depth at institutional processes that took place and gave rise to positive outcomes. Of course, research like this that places development interventions in a broader historical and political context is a far remove from adoption studies or narrow project impact studies that try and attribute outcomes in a quantitative way to particular projects, programmes or policies. Some of the growing literature in this area has been cited already. There is also a literature on how to go about such studies (Messerschmidt, 1981; Mosse *et al.*, 1998; Gellner and Hirsch, 2001; Biggs and Matsaert, 2004). However, it is important to note that only very rarely are all or some of the results of such studies uncontested by different actors. Even when analysing positive situations, there will be some actors who claim and assert that different factors should have been taken into account and that causes and effects occurred in different ways. Empirical evidence may or may not be used in these disputes. To some extent, these issues can never be resolved in a definitive way. Consequently, it takes considerable courage and innovative ability to initiate, facilitate and conduct such research. Innovative rural development practitioners interested in understanding and learning how positive changes have taken place in the past could initiate such studies and find ways to circulate existing studies of this type.

CONCLUSIONS

Two themes have run through this paper. The first is that we can do more to learn from and support positive situations where poverty reduction and social inclusion are already taking place. Second, effective innovations in policy and institutional arenas are, by their very nature, generally location and time specific. It would appear that actors who are effective in being institutionally innovative are always looking for and finding room to manoeuvre in the local political and cultural context.

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