

**Opportunities for
Creating Program
Synergy by
Focusing on Women:
Recommendations
for USAID/Nepal**

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1625 Massachusetts Ave. NW, Suite 550, Washington, DC 20036 USA
Tel.: 202-332-2853 Fax: 202-332-8257 Internet: info@widtech.org

A Women in Development Technical Assistance Project

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Opportunities for Creating Program Synergy by Focusing on Women: Recommendations for USAID/Nepal

by

Michael Paolisso, WIDTECH Social Scientist
Gretchen Bloom, Gender Advisor, ANE Bureau

Development Alternatives, Inc.

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I. Introduction

During the period of January 19-31, 1997, the above authors completed a visit to Nepal to assist USAID/N in its efforts to create synergy both within and between strategic objective activities. For the purposes of this exercise, the Mission agreed to use “women” as a common denominator. During the team’s time in Nepal, meetings were held with key USAID/N staff and representatives of partner organizations. The team also facilitated two partner workshops with the intent to generate suggestions for actions USAID/N can take to advance synergy. The team also completed field visits to observe groups that are being supported by activities under each SO. The team debriefed USAID/N senior staff on the key findings contained in this report before their departure from country.

USAID/Nepal's three strategic objectives are: 1) increased sustainable production and sales of forest and high-value agricultural products (SO1); 2) reduced fertility and improved maternal and child health (SO2); and 3) increased women's empowerment (SO3). Program synergy at USAID/N requires the integration of all three of these strategic objectives. SO teams have begun the process of integrating across strategic objectives and establishing the partner coordination necessary to provide integrated services to Nepali women and men. No one strategic objective can alone carry the responsibility of creating synergy across Mission programs. With Washington's continued support, USAID/N’s strategic objective teams can make important progress toward improving their development assistance through program synergy.

The presence of a strategic objective focused on women’s empowerment has had significant and positive benefits for USAID/N’s efforts to include women in program and project activities and thus to enhance development impact across the portfolio. The presence of SO3 and its activities have also been a key impetus behind the Mission’s efforts to look for synergies across strategic objectives. The benefits of a strategic focus on women’s empowerment are only now just becoming visible, both for women customers and in terms of the sustainability of attention to gender concerns within USAID/N. For these reasons, it is recommended that USAID/W continue to support USAID/N’s strategic objective for women’s empowerment.

While the efforts of SO3 may be the most visible in terms of creating women’s empowerment, both SO1 and SO2 also provide essential assistance to Nepali women. In fact, it could be argued that, in a less strategic and perhaps more indirect way, the activities for women under SO1 and SO2 are also contributing to women’s empowerment. These strategic objectives help Nepal meet essential agricultural, forestry, health and family planning goals, all of which benefit both women and men.

This report contains the main recommendations of the team for strengthening synergy among USAID/N's strategic objectives by focusing on women. We list nine major recommendations that emerged from our meetings, interviews and observations. Within each major recommendation, we propose immediate, medium-term, and longer-term actions USAID/N can take to implement the proposed recommendation. We have, somewhat arbitrarily, defined the time period of immediate as 1-3 months, medium as 4-6 months, and longer term as 7-12 months. We have attempted to be as strategic as possible in selecting our key recommendations from a much larger pool of good ideas and suggestions, and have tried to order actions by time periods in a way that is both practical and logical.

It should be noted that the ability of the team to collect sufficient information, in a very short time period, to support the following recommendations and actions would not have been possible without USAID/N’s extensive preparation before our arrival. Materials on the Mission’s strategies, activities

and partner linkages were prepared for the team before our arrival in Nepal. In addition, the scheduled meetings with key program and project staff and the visits with community groups covered a wide range of USAID/N-supported activities. This extensive preparation is illustrative of USAID/N's staff's strong commitment to create synergies across programs and to focus on increasing women's participation to achieve strategic objectives. This commitment can be found in all SO program areas.

II. Recommendations

1. Increase Information Exchange and Communication within the Mission and among All the Partners

One of the most consistent requests from USAID/N partners across all SOs was the need to know more about each others' programs and areas of implementation. Such information is seen as a prerequisite for meaningful discussions of possible synergies intra- and inter-SOs. Similarly, such sharing needs to take place in the USAID mission within and between so teams.

Immediate actions: Profiles for all USAID/N partners are being developed using an agreed upon partner profile format. These profiles were a “work-in-progress” when we were in Nepal and now the Mission has completed 24 profiles. These profiles need to be completed for all partners, since they have great utility.

Medium-term actions: Partners for SO1 and SO2 should meet to learn about each others' activities and to discuss possible internal synergies within each SO. In planning these meetings, lessons learned from the SO3 partner meetings should be used. Following a December 1996 workshop of all SO3 partners, the partners decided to continue the progress achieved in that workshop by holding a series of thematic partner meetings to which representatives from all three SOs were invited. This demonstrates a unique level of commitment and partnering among the SO3 partners and should set an example for the SO1 and SO2 partners. These partner meetings have become an excellent tool for addressing synergy both internally to SO3 and across to SO1 and SO2.

Additionally, USAID/N should finalize the procedures for continually updating the database.

At the same time, primary partners should begin and/or continue efforts to create a resource depository for their development materials, particularly in the case of literacy and post literacy materials. Such a resource depository would make it easier for partners to access public domain development materials, and help reduce unnecessary duplication. For example, the SO3 partners have already committed to and are fully sharing with each other all their resource materials. This sharing has bridged a big competitive early gulf between them where they were originally hesitant to share materials because of competition.

To acquire similar information from Nepali NGOs, a short questionnaire will have to be developed. Suggestions were given at the Nepalgunj workshop on what type of information each NGO should provide (for example, name of organization, activities with women, INGO/contractor linkages by activity, donor support by activity, and so on), and in fact one working group began the process of listing each organization's program areas, donors, and district locations.

Longer-term actions: USAID/N should consider completely computerizing the partner database with established protocols for updating information. Ideally, it should also be linked with efforts in Nepal to upload databases with Geographical Information Systems (GIS). It would then be possible to show, with great precision, USAID/N activities by SO, INGO/NGO/contractor, and type of activity on a map, including those activities that have been completed, are in progress, and are planned or proposed. At a glance, the GIS-referenced partner profile could be used to highlight and suggest areas for program synergy, both within USAID/N and with other donors. It would also be useful for showing areas where program “hand-off,” intra- and inter-SO, has occurred or is anticipated.

We note that the Mission has already shown an interest in using this database but does not have the capacity to do so internally as it is a very complex database package. A useful contact for developing a GIS link is ICIMOD (International Centre for Integrated Mountain Development). USAID/N is already providing support to develop a comprehensive GIS for the Mid-Western Development Region. Bill Berger, UNDP/Kathmandu, is also a source of information. The ANE bureau agreement with the Bureau of the Census (BUCEN) may also be tapped for assistance.

If GIS is impossible, because it is too costly or too complicated, the format recently developed by the Mission for plotting SO3 activities by VDC (village development committee) and the existing map overlays used by the other SOs should be integrated.

2. Maintain Existing Synergy Momentum in USAID/N and with Partners

Many of the staff of USAID/N and its partners feel that a major challenge to strengthening program synergy is the need to create horizontal linkages across SOs, particularly at the IR and IR indicator levels. While recognizing the need to have vertical and horizontal integration within SOs, at the field implementation level there are many possibilities to integrate activities across SOs. In fact, this integration is already occurring, although it is not being fully documented and supported. There is an urgent need for an expanded institutional mechanism to further identify SO linkages and to maintain the momentum generated before and during the visit to create inter-program synergies.

Immediate actions: Within USAID/N, a synergy committee has already been formed. Representatives from each SO team and from the program office are members. The key is for the Mission to sustain the momentum of this committee. Partners should select one representative (standing or rotating) from each SO team to work with the USAID/N synergy committee. Consistent with USAID/N strategic objectives, management capability, and funding levels and cycles, the synergy committee and partner representatives should identify key Nepali NGOs in selected areas to form local-level synergy teams.

Medium-term actions: The USAID/N synergy committee should develop a work plan for senior management review and comment. This report contains concrete suggestions of activities the synergy committee should undertake, and possible means of support for their work. Given the existing workloads of USAID/N staff, a practical requirement of the work plan is the sharing of tasks and responsibilities with other SO staff and partners. The role of the committee should be to lead efforts to identify synergy points, and then to coordinate efforts to address these points. The work plan should identify a limited number of possible synergies and propose steps to implement them. It is recommended that the committee begin with the synergy points presented in this report. It is also suggested that the synergy committee be provided technical support, for example, by G/WID.

Longer-term actions: Begin development of a protocol for ensuring that new activities undertaken by USAID/N in one SO are screened for their possible links to ongoing or proposed activities in the other SOs. Review procedures should be developed for various stages of project development, such as RFP/RFA, proposal review, implementation, and so on. It is suggested that USAID/N seek technical assistance in developing this protocol.

3. Maximize the Use of Core Areas to Promote Synergy

As the Mission acknowledges, geographic proximity at the field level is the first requirement for synergy. To its credit, the Mission is looking for ways to achieve better geographic focus where possible. The SO3 team has already stated that working in core districts and VDCs is a parameter for their future programs. We note that many VDCs and community groups (for example, community forest user groups, production and market groups, and mothers' groups) are already synergistically including education, income generation, and family planning activities. There is an existing high demand in areas where USAID/N already has a strong presence for multiple types of assistance that can be integrated. This should not preclude working in new geographic areas where needs are also high, or developing additional core areas. Nonetheless, a relatively higher proportion of USAID/N support to promote synergies should be focused on existing core areas.

Immediate actions: An obvious core area is the Midwestern Development Region, specifically the areas where the new SO1 activities, MARD (Market Access for Rural Development) and EFEA (Environment and Forest Enterprise Activity), will be working. Geographically, this region represents opportunities for linking activities across all SOs, though we recognize that SO2 and SO3 core areas are somewhat different. A first step to identifying potential synergies is to involve the USAID/N synergy committee in the next few quarterly coordinating committee meetings for MARD and EFEA, with the purpose of identifying concrete mechanisms for increasing synergy across SOs.

Some immediate suggestions were proposed during the team's field visits. These recommendations include linking MARD and EFEA support of women's production, marketing and forestry groups with SO3's interventions where possible, especially literacy and economic empowerment activities, and increasing these same groups' access to SO2's family planning and health outreach activities (one very specific suggestion was the use of MARD and EFEA logistical support in better distributing health supplies).

Medium-term actions: The synergy committee should review partner profiles for core areas other than Midwestern Development Region as a first step to identifying additional core areas. The purpose is to seek areas where USAID assistance is already substantial and where different existing interventions can be linked.

Longer-term actions: Develop a simple monitoring and evaluation system to track the percentage of synergistic activities proposed/completed in core areas versus non-core areas. Some indicators of synergy outcomes and program inputs should be developed, as a first step in producing information that would help USAID/N capture the costs/benefits of focusing varying levels of resources on core versus non-core areas. This can be combined with GIS work. These outcomes should be shared in the R4 report to USAID/W to reflect the qualitative nature of USAID assistance to Nepal as well as the achievement of quantitative targets.

4. Improve Data Collection on Changes in Gender Roles and Relations Across All SOs

Through various baseline surveys, questionnaires, case studies, and anecdotal reports, USAID/N has a fairly extensive information base on gender roles and relations, across a wide range of regions and ethnic groups. However, USAID/N staff and partner organizations are not completely aware of this information, which has been collected under different Mission activities and during different time periods. Nonetheless, the existence of this gender disaggregated information is a valuable tool to help guide USAID/N in its efforts to create synergies across SOs that focus on women. This information

would be significantly more useful if improved by the systematic addition of new data that are directly relevant to assessing changes in gender roles and relations and women's empowerment.

Immediate actions: Review existing, ongoing, and planned baselines and surveys that disaggregate data by gender and/or focus specifically on women. Identify opportunities and constraints to improve the comparability of information and its utility for capturing the effects of synergy. We do note, however, that the Mission debated at length the viability of addressing across-SO synergy for the new SO3 baseline survey and concluded that it would distract from the core purpose of the baseline (documenting SO-level change) and, moreover, that it would vastly complicate the core intent of the survey (and add expense and time). That is, addressing synergy in a baseline sense was not feasible and might prove problematic.

Also, the USAID/N synergy committee should work with partners to identify 3 to 5 examples of ongoing synergy at the district or VDC level that can be documented as success and "lesson-learned" stories. Synergy is already occurring at the field level. In our field trip, we encountered numerous examples of Nepali NGOs implementing, in one site, USAID/N and other donor-supported activities focused on women that support all three Mission strategic objectives. For example, the Nepal Red Cross Society in Salyan has an integrated program that covers family planning, reproductive health, and women's economic activities; BASE (Backward Society Education) in Dang provides Tharu women with literacy (basic and post), credit and vegetable production assistance; and The Asia Foundation (TAF) in the southern plains (*terai*) and hill areas supports both basic literacy and post-literacy work in legal rights and representation. The value of case studies of these organizations' (and others) synergistic efforts is that they demonstrate how local partners have creatively made links between SO activities and how they overcame obstacles (socio-cultural, logistical, institutional, and such), as well as identifying the challenges they face in terms of sustaining their integrated efforts. Collectively, the case studies should provide lessons for how to scale up synergy across regions and programs.

Medium-term actions: Identify and implement concrete steps to develop an SO-wide, gender-disaggregated information system. This information system should consist of existing, ongoing and proposed databases that disaggregate data by gender and/or use women as the reference point for measuring program activities (for example, women using family planning methods, taking basic and post literacy classes, receiving technical assistance in agriculture or forestry, and so on). Inclusion of the SO3 baseline survey will be an important contribution to the overall information system. The intent should not be to make each database identical, but to 1) identify key questions/data areas that, if possible, all future USAID/N surveys or questionnaires should include, and 2) cross-link existing data which are key for future program planning for addressing gender and empowerment issues.

Contract with a local social scientist/gender specialist to complete case studies on local level synergies. This consultant should work with partners with guidance from the USAID/N synergy committee. USAID/N should request G/WID to provide technical assistance to support the design and implementation of these case studies.

Longer-term actions: Establish a gender database, including linking to the GIS proposed above for partner profiles. Such a system would allow USAID/N tremendous flexibility in presenting a wide range of information about programs (inputs and results), partners, sectors, cultural variation, and gender by geographical region. Such information would be of significant usefulness in program planning.

5. Continue to Support Literacy Due to Its Critical Contribution to Increasing Women's Empowerment

USAID/N once provided literacy as a cross-cutting service to all Mission programs. When the Mission reconsidered its strategy in 1995, however, it realized that literacy's special contribution, along with legal rights/advocacy, and economic participation, was to women's empowerment. During our visit, literacy was most frequently mentioned as the starting point for women's empowerment. The SO3 literacy program cannot currently meet the demand for classes, due to funding constraints. Literacy is valuable for all the USAID/N SOs, but it is most critical to SO3. SO3's literacy effort can no longer function as a general national-level service provider for the other SOs. USAID/N should fully support literacy's critical function within SO3 and seek alternative ways to accommodate the basic literacy and post-literacy needs of the Mission as a whole.

Immediate actions: Representatives from SO1 and SO2 and their partners should attend SO3's literacy partner meetings. These meetings can serve as a clearing house of linkage opportunities (especially where core areas of SO3 and other SOs coincide) to: improve the synergy and coordination between basic and post-literacy curricula so women do not drop out and are more successful; discuss new ideas for changes in basic and existing post-literacy programs for better links to USAID/N objectives; share information on the capacities of local Nepali organizations to handle classes; and, through shared information, to reduce divisive differences in financial and managerial arrangements with local Nepali organizations.

Medium-term actions: Both SO1 and SO3 should consider developing post-literacy courses which reinforce each objective's messages and which build in links and synergy with the other SOs. We understand this is in process or being discussed. SO2's existing post-literacy course, called HEAL (Health Education and Adult Literacy), should be evaluated and amended to build in links and synergy with the other SOs. To help develop these new or revised courses, a post-literacy team of SO1, SO2, and SO3 USAID/N staff and partners could be created to coordinate these efforts and increase synergies where possible. The team could coordinate closely with the basic literacy partner's group.

SO1 and SO2 have acknowledged that for them and their partners to conduct basic literacy programs is inefficient. USAID/N should conduct discussions with staff and partners to seek alternative ways of providing literacy such as SO1 and SO2 "buying" literacy on a fee-for-service basis. One or more alternatives should be implemented as soon as possible.

Longer-term actions: Conduct evaluations of the impacts of literacy and post-literacy programs along achievement and synergy variables. The SO3 literacy/post-literacy research on the impact on empowerment is about to be completed. The Global Bureau's Girls' and Women's Education Activity's (GWE) research in Nepal may provide another possible evaluation opportunity.

6. Attend to the Importance of Group Participation As an Aspect of Synergy and Empowerment

The opportunities for synergy and empowerment through women's groups are obvious to all observers. Any initial intervention, whether literacy, reproductive health, or economic empowerment, especially when it allows for group formation, begins to empower the women in that group. What is essential, then, is to build upon the preliminary empowerment which has occurred by providing additional development support. Women who have been empowered want more — they want synergistic

opportunities. This supports not only increased participation in the SO3 interventions but also those of SO1 and SO2.

Immediate actions: The partners identified the importance of group formation for improving women's empowerment. A first step in conveying this importance to other partners would be to increase awareness through partner meetings where partners with good experience of group formation could share their experiences.

Medium-term actions: Support a research effort to collect information on group formation and its impact on the SOs, especially women's empowerment. It is important that the survey capture the dynamics of group formation and evolution. The groups that are being formed by women are very heterogeneous in their organization, linkage to other groups and development activities, and their potential for expansion, growth and sustainability. For example, it is important, when thinking about linking literacy with economic activities in the *terai*, to understand that the former groups are much larger than the latter and demand much less trust and cooperation with each other. Credit/savings and production groups of women are smaller, requiring confidence and close cooperation not required in a class setting. Also, some groups are informal, including production groups, while others have become formally recognized stable groups through registering with the government. Of note is the fact that one group, SAPPROS (Support Activities for Poor Producers), is already conducting a study of group dynamics. Information and experience gained by SAPPROS and others working with women's groups can be valuable resources to all the SOs.

Longer-term action: One of the working groups in the Nepalgunj workshop felt that all of USAID's investments should go into empowering women's groups since it is beginning to make such a difference, whereas earlier investments in women in development (WID) activities were perceived to have done less to transform Nepal's development process. It will be important to document USAID/Nepal's approach to empowering through women's groups for "lessons learned" for other donors in Nepal and other USAID Missions around the world. G/WID has already expressed interest in preparing a case study of USAID/Nepal's experiences with empowering women's groups (rec #9).

7. Use Multiple Entry Points to Create Synergy

The strong case made above for focusing on literacy as the first intervention in creating synergy does not preclude initiating synergy by focusing first on women's productive roles, women's health, or other Mission interventions. In fact, almost any activity (for example, credit, income generation, family planning, HIV/AIDS, legal rights training, or advocacy) can serve as an effective entry point to promoting synergy. The ultimate selection of which activity depends on the felt needs and interests of the women themselves, the possible next "hand-off" activities at either partner or USAID/N levels, the availability of local technical assistance, and the need to strengthen performance in meeting IR targets.

Immediate actions: Conduct an informal but energetic social marketing campaign about the opportunities for women to participate in all Mission activities, aimed at local Nepali implementing organizations. Ask them to look ahead and anticipate the need and opportunities for linkages and hand-offs between groups. Ask them to identify groups of women that have completed or are near completing either a literacy, legal or advocacy training, economic, or health and family planning activity and are interested in additional activities. Ask them to let women know early of possible other opportunities for continued growth and participation. We recognize that, at this time, this effort will

have to be conducted at the local level and on an ad hoc basis, dependent on the good will, enthusiasm and perceived received value on the part of the local organizations.

Use information from the partner profiles to develop strategic, practical, and customer- based criteria that could be used in a decision-making framework to determine which groups to support. We note that the partner profiles, though useful in many other ways, will not be able to provide timely information on when groups complete activities and are not a dynamic, continuously updated information tool. Making them meet either standard would be too management intensive for both the partners to update and for the Mission to collate and synthesize. Nonetheless, they are a tool which can be used in limited, strategic ways — and they are popular with the partners.

Medium-term action: Develop some decision-making guidelines that would help USAID/N staff evaluate the potential synergy from an intervention and the possible program and practical opportunities and constraints. Key questions in the guidelines would be, for example: How might the activity contribute to more than one SO or IR performance indicator (within and between)? What are the partner linkage requirements for implementation? Is the activity in a core or non-core area? Is funding available to lead to a successful “hand-off”? Does the intervention occur in a geographical or substantive area where existing USAID/N gender-disaggregated data are either lacking or indicate a need for more intervention? Does the activity produce results directly leading to increased SO-level impact in high value agriculture, health and family planning, and/or women's empowerment? Answers to these and other guideline questions should be provided by actions proposed under many of the recommendations in this report.

Longer-term actions: Monitor and evaluate over time the usefulness of decision-making guidelines developed during the medium-term action period for determining entry points, as well as total packages, for promoting synergy and enhancing impact. The goal should be enhanced development impact through synergistic interventions, not synergy itself.

8. Strive to Resolve Contractual, Fiscal, and Management Challenges

Frequently, both USAID/N staff and partners express frustration with the contractual, fiscal and management issues surrounding basic project implementation. These frustrations will be increased as complications inevitably arise from attempts at creating synergy. Many of these issues will continue to remain challenges, since it is not often possible to change bureaucratic rules and procedures. Nonetheless, with awareness, it may be possible to modify procedures slightly to accommodate a more flexible approach.

Immediate actions: Discussions should be held within USAID/N on how the synergy committee and representative partners can be included in the preliminary conceptual discussions of future RFPs and RFAs while maintaining a contractual environment of open and fair competition. Upcoming SO3 RFAs/RFPs offer an immediate opportunity for the Mission to grapple with these issues. SO3 partner meetings have already established a forum for addressing synergy in future SO3 activities. Although, it is a very delicate process to include partners while maintain an open competitive environment, small steps toward a more participatory RFA/RFP process would help promote partner collaboration and program synergy.

Medium-term actions: The fact that partners are often restricted by the Nepali government to working in limited geographic areas restricts synergy possibilities. Dialogue with partners and relevant government officials should be initiated to discuss possible actions to alleviate this constraint.

Longer-term actions: The partners' different funding cycles and internal financial regulations cause problems. This will be even truer as USAID/N tries to conduct activities across projects and SOs. Also, jealousies are created among partners when pay scales, per diem rates, and so on are different. Although USAID/N cannot require contractors to use similar pay rates, the Mission can encourage partners to work together to minimize these differences and may be able to establish Mission-wide guidelines to foster this cooperation.

9. Request Technical Assistance to Support Continued Synergy Efforts

A number of recommended actions for promoting women-focused synergy at USAID/N would benefit from technical assistance. Possible areas of technical assistance have already been mentioned above. This assistance could be provided by a variety of sources, including G/WID, the ANE bureau, or other global bureau centers.

In addition, USAID/Nepal should share its experiences as a result of its efforts to strategically address women's needs with other USAID Missions and Washington-based staff. This SO is the only agency SO focused on women's empowerment. As such, it is advancing the conceptual agenda by forcing technical consideration of empowerment and has merit for its demonstration effect. This SO responds directly and strategically to the agency's gender plan of action (GPA) and allows Agency-wide role modeling, where appropriate.

Immediate actions: USAID/Nepal should develop a work plan for such a workshop and case study. USAID/N should request technical assistance from G/WID to develop this work plan. With G/WID help, this information and experience can be prepared as a case study highlighting strategic, programmatic, and practical issues. The lessons learned from the Mission's efforts both to create a strategic objective focused on women's empowerment and to stimulate program synergy by focusing on women across strategic objectives would be valuable to others, sensitizing, promoting, inspiring and guiding them in their efforts to better address gender issues.

Medium-term actions: Assistance could be provided to support the USAID/N synergy coordinating committee, to evaluate existing baselines and surveys for gender comparability and utility in terms of capturing synergy, and in other areas. USAID/N should work with G/WID and others to develop a work plan for these suggestions.

Longer-term actions: USAID/N should work with G/WID to prepare additional materials, much of which will naturally flow out of many of the above recommended actions, particularly those related to information needs and communication, the establishment of coordination committees, the development of a gender information system, and program steps such as evaluating entry points, linking with government and other donors, and contractual issues related to securing continued support for empowerment and synergy activities.