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Land Rights movement in Nepal
By Jagat Basnet, CSRC

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Nepali peasantry was 'assured' of 'Land to the Tillers' by various political parties, even as far back as the 1940s, but a meaningful or significant land reform process has yet to see the light of the day. The much discussed 'land reform' programme of 1964, which commenced only during the last days of the Panchayat regime, saw no positive impact, and most tenant and landless farmers in the country remained under control of powerful landlords through the following decades.

Today oppressed farmers, along with civil-society, are voicing their concerns and proposing alternative policies for land rights. The discourse on land rights is deepening, and social mobilization for the goal of genuine land reform is widening. More importantly, the land reform agenda is being discussed at local community and district level forums, and no longer confined to the chambers of planning commission, party headquarters or palace corridors. Mass action and interaction for land reform has evolved from the ground, and as a result more than 15,000 tenant and landless farmers have obtained land rights.

The experience of the Community Self-Reliance Centre (CSRC), a Nepali civil society organization that focuses on capacity-building of people deprived of their land rights, has shown that those who gained freedom from landlords increased both their bargaining power for wages and their participation in development activities. In Nepal, land is the major cause of conflict.

Forums of concerned groups and people's organizations, facilitated by CSRC, have evolved at different levels, bringing about local level interaction and awareness of land right issues. People's organizations have emerged at village, district and national levels and are built up and empowering themselves to be the backbone for success of the whole movement. The National Land Rights Concern Group (NLRCG) has also emerged as a forum in which other civil society organizations, including NGOs and CBOs, can work together to strengthen people's organizations and advocate for cultivators' land rights.

One key lesson is that local movements must be linked with policy dialogue, and policy information shared with the land-deprived people. Even educated people in Nepal are unaware of their land rights legislation and regulations. In this respect, CSRC has been working with the landless poor and tenant farmers who have organized themselves to fight for their land rights. Major activities include context analysis, participatory planning, developing people's organizations, stakeholder analysis and pressurizing government agencies and stakeholders to support tenant and landless farmers

Land reform is not merely providing land from one tenure group to another, it is about changing the power structure and socio-economic relations, about ensuring a better livelihood for peasants. We have been taking land reform as an economic development, it is not only this; it is also freedom, and release from bondage and exploitation. At present, landlord and patriarchal power has restricted human freedom and development. In Nepal, as in many other countries, the loss of land is the loss of livelihood, income, security, food, shelter and dignity of people. Unless there is a more equitable distribution of economic and political powers, the interest of the poorest of the poor will not be represented.

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