

Chapter VIII

Trend of social capital in farming communities

Farming communities in Western Nepal are rich in collective action, cooperation, trust and common welfare norms nurtured by rich stock of social capital accumulated within their integrated interactive social structures and livelihood framework since long time. The higher level of social capital stock found in farming communities by this study is the evidence in this context. The transformation of farming communities in different aspects of social structures and livelihood framework is faster in recent years. The impact of social change, demographic dynamics and development interventions in natural and human resources in farming communities is widely discussed and explored subject. The temporal trends in these resources are obvious through many scientific studies. Social capital is recently introduced area in the discussion and yet to be dissected fully in its complex physiology and formation process to get the full understanding of all the processes and trends. The main question here to be answered is how the speed of transformation in other aspects of livelihood is affecting the social capital stock in communities with time.

This chapter explores about perceived changes by communities in social capital stock on their subjective judgment, and evidences in support of such perception. The people's perception is the only way to understand such trends in communities where documented data sets are rare in this subject. Focus groups discussion is one way to know the common perception of the people regarding trends in social capital expressions in communities. Morgan & Kreuger (1993) mentioned focus groups as useful tools to explore in such subject where consensus is needed and there are differences between the participants in their views and perceptions.

8.1 Focus group

The main objective of the focus groups discussion was to know the perception of old people about trend of social capital dimensions like trust, social networks, collective action, social norms, reciprocity and proactivity in their communities. What they have perceived about changes in these features of communities during their early times and present days, was the central point of focus group discussion.

- To know the level of trust, collective action, reciprocity, networks, proactivity and social norms in earlier time and at present in their community.
- To gather qualitative evidence associated with their perception.
- To quantify changes during last thirty years of time in the above-mentioned social capital dimensions.

8.1.1 Focus group discussion sites

Four sites were selected to conduct focus group discussion namely Khalanga (Darchula), Bhatkanda (Dadeldhura), Tilachaud (Kanchanpur) and Dhangadi (Kailali) out of 20 sites in questionnaire survey. These sites represent three ecological zones high mountain, mid hills and Terai of the region. Khalanga is old settlement with generation long residential history, Bhatkanda, Tilachaud and Dhangadi are mixed one composed of migrants and original inhabitants. These sites vary in access to transportation, communication, market, and other educational infrastructures. However there is similarity in social structures and cultural traditions to a large extent.

8.1.2 Participants

The male and female participants were selected from the communities with age of more than 50 years. The recommended number of people per group is usually six to ten but some researchers have used up to fifteen people (Goss & Leinbach, 1996). In this study, 15 participants were selected for focus group discussion. The participants were selected purposively based on inquiry with key informants e.g. field

level agricultural technicians, businessman and teachers after brief discussion with them about the objective of the study and expected outcomes. The participants were from different backgrounds like farmers, businessman, teachers, priests and other professionals.

8.1.3 Focus group process

The key issues were collected from the individuals prior to organize the focus group discussion to know the local level information on social capital dimensions. The local issues were cited during group discussion to make the meaning of social capital and its dimensions clear to the participants. The time period of 30 year was selected arbitrarily without any important events linked with this. It is difficult to perceive the trends of social capital within short period of time and similarly for long period changes cannot be retrieved easily by the human memory. In this premises 30 year was thought to be suitable intermediate period for the discussion. The major steps followed in focus group discussion were as follows.

Step-1: The participants were introduced with the study objective and expected cooperation needed to complete. The theme of social capital and its selected dimensions were discussed with the participants to make them understand the process well. Local level examples were cited during the discussion to bring clarity about social capital and its selected dimensions.

Step-2: Participants were divided into three groups and asked to present their views on each dimension of social capital increased, decreased, not changed. The dimensions were quantified by using the discs (Figure 8.1). Some of the basic questions asked to the participants are as follows.

- If the level of trust was this much (showing the pile of discs) in the community 30 years before, how much do you think at present?
- If the level of networks was this much in the community 30 years before, how much do you think at present?

- If the level of participation in collective action for common welfare was this much in the community 30 years before, how much do you think at present?
- If the level of reciprocity among the households in the community was this much 30 years before, how much do you think at present?
- If the level of proactivity for common goodness was this much in the community 30 years before, how much do you think at present?
- If the number of good norms that guide and shape the individuals behavior in the community were this much in the community 30 years before, how many do you think at present?



Figure 8.1 Estimation of decline in social capital dimensions during last thirty years

Photo: Rajendra Mishra

Step-3: The views from all three groups were discussed in the common floor and again groups were separated to list the examples or evidences in support of their views. They listed out the evidences in support of their views and finally discussed in common floor to filter out the irrelevant and highly individualistic examples.

8.2 Social capital trend

All the participants of focus group discussion agreed on that social capital stock is declined in their communities during last thirty years however some improvements can be traced out in social networks and norms. The improvements are negated by the sharp decline in some dimensions of social capital. The overall social

capital stock in these communities was declined by 31.2-48.7 percent over the period however it is difficult to say which decade/ socio political change was detrimental behind for such decline.

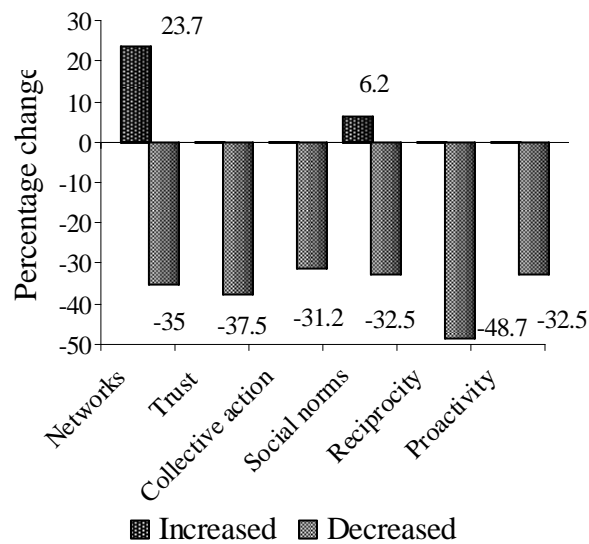


Figure 8.2 Trend in SC dimensions during last thirty years

Source: Focus group discussion, 2005

8.2.1 Networks

The neighborhood networks are found declined in the communities. Neighborhood connections were close and strong in past but at present such ties are loose and deteriorated in quality. The move from combined family to nuclear family and involvement of individuals in off farm income generating activities has deteriorated the neighborhood connections over time. The trend toward the individualistic society has declined traditional informal ties among neighborhood and family clans. The participants estimated community network connections were declined 35 percent during last thirty years on an average (Table 8.1). Mostly such decline is in informal traditional connections and family clans.

The immediate neighborhood connections are deteriorated but bridging and linking connections are stronger due to development of transportation, communication

and education. People can interact with other people from diverse locality, professions and origin. The new type of professional ties, interest group ties and other objective based connections are increased. The bridging and linking ties are increased by higher percentage in townships in comparison to rural areas. The participants estimated 23.7 percent increase in such non-traditional ties in the communities (Table 8.1). Some of the important points mentioned by participants in support of their views are as follows.

- In the past people used to come together in leisure time in a convenient place and sit together but now such gathering is very rare.
- A businessman or a service holder does not feel to make close connection with neighboring farmer, this does not mean there is no connection but the quality of connection is not the same as in the past.
- The family clans were united in the past but in recent year's family clan are not so strong.
- People do not like to go each other's home and some time people do not know what is happening in the nearby households
- The increased culture of nuclear family

8.2.2 Trust

This is the most important asset or dimensions of social capital declined in the communities over time. Intra household trust, thick and thin trust all are declined sharply in the communities. The communities and households were trust worthy in the past. Participants in focus group discussion estimated even more than 45 percent decline in trust level. The high level of trust in communities was embedded between parent and children and among the brotherhood, which is declined creating many socio economic consequences in the communities. **“Now trust resides in money, if you have money you are trusted and respected otherwise no one will trust you”** is perception of the people. The rate of decline as per the estimation is higher in areas near the townships, which are more, exposed to modern development activities and infrastructure in comparison to interior farming communities. The participants

estimated 37.5 percent decline in trust level during the last thirty years (Table 8.1). The supportive views for their perception are as follows.

- Villagers lock their door before going outside which was not common in the past.
- The people feel less secure about their children's care in their old age in the past people used to feel secure about this in their old age.
- In the farmers groups one has to provide other members title as collateral if he is interested to get more loan than his deposit from the group fund. This is indicator of poor trust level among the group members.
- People do not believe strangers like they used to in past time.
- Previously people settle conflicts at local level now they go to court or police office.

8.2.3 Collective action and cooperation

The community members were highly interdependent and collective action were ways to get by from daily livelihood problems in the past, presently the quantity and quality of collective action and cooperation is deteriorated in communities. In the past, people come together naturally with enthusiasm in collective action but now repeated request is needed to come together for such action. The decline in collective action and cooperation is similar to trust. The total decline is estimated about 31.2 percent during last thirty years (Table 8.1). The community people have comparatively diversified and independent livelihood at present than in the past. People are more empowered and capable in individual performance, which has negatively affected the collective action and cooperation in the communities. However, this does not imply there is lesser need of collective actions and cooperation at present. In reality need for collective action and cooperation is more due to continuous degradation of livelihood supporting resources and increased competition in all spheres of life. The supportive views for their perception are as follows.

- Participation in religious ceremonies is not like in the past and it is declining.

- Poor status of community resources (irrigation channel, water tapes and others)
- Participation in communal activities in farming is not common as was in the past.
- Participation in collective action was ready in past but now people need to be requested to participate in such action by the leaders or they look for outside support.
- People calculate what benefit they will get individually from participation.

8.2.4 Social norms

A large number of good social norms are already lost (quality and quantity) and the process is continued and remaining social norms are less effective to shape the individual behavior in the communities. Participants believe 32 percent of good social norms were either lost or are inactive but there is increment of certain good norms regarding social taboos and equity. The norms for sense of community, cooperation, reciprocity and collective action, good attitudes toward adults, children and women are deteriorated. Such deterioration has created the fertile environment for social crimes in recent years. The people now do not care what other people are doing in the community even some activities might be harmful for the community as whole. In the past, people used to care for each other in their activities and difficulties. The supportive views for their perception as mentioned by participants are as follows.

- People are less altruistic now than in the past
- The respect and care to old people in the community is declining

8.2.5 Reciprocity

The tradition of reciprocity is declined both in quantity and quality during the last thirty years. The total decline is estimated about 48.7 percent, which is highest among the social capital dimensions under consideration. Previously people feel happy to give anything to others in the community but now one have to request and

some time people reluctant to give and take. The quality of the give and take relationship is also deteriorating during the period. The most frequently reciprocated commodities in neighborhood are yoghurt, other milk products, fruits and vegetables, food grains, seed and breeds, seedlings and saplings and their reciprocity is declining. People are more interested to sell their goods and services rather to give others in the community because most of the things are sellable due to the development of markets. The supportive views for their perception as mentioned by participants are as follows.

- People reciprocate milk and milk products less frequently than in the past.
- Vegetable , fruits and food grains are not frequently reciprocated, people are more interested in selling
- If any people in the community got new seeds, saplings and information in the past they share such things to other community members but now people are reluctant to share

8.2.6 Proactivity

The participants concluded that inherent proactivity regarding common goodness in the communities is declined during last thirty years by 32.5 percent. Now people do not like to be the pacesetter for any kind of collective work for common wellbeing. Previously individuals who know first, stand in front for any kind of community actions irrespective of the benefits produced for him but now people are more concerned about their own benefits from such actions. The major reason behind such socio- psychological changes as perceived by people is increased flow of outside resources and corruption. They think he is getting something personally so he is trying to be pacesetter in such community actions. Such doubt is result of deteriorated trust level in the communities. The supportive views for their perception as mentioned by participants are as follows.

- There is need of drinking water, treks and health and schools but people do not care about the solution of those problems. They wait for government support

or outside support. Previously community people used to construct these things without external support.

- The condition of previously developed community resources is poor in many locations.

Table 8.1 Trends in social capital dimensions

Place	Dimensions of social capital and perceived percentage of change									
	Networks*		Trust	Collective action*		Social norms*		Reciprocity	Proactivity	
	+	-	-	+	-	+	-	-	-	
Khalanga	20	30	35		25	5	25	40	30	
Bhatkanda	25	35	30	10	30	10	30	50	35	
Tilachaud	20	35	40		30	5	35	50	25	
Dhangadi	30	40	45		40	5	40	55	40	
Average	23.7	35	37.5		31.2	6.2	32.5	48.7	32.5	

***Note:** In networks, collective actions and social norms, participants perceived some improvements in some parts which are mentioned in + column. For example overall networks are declined but external networks are improved during the period so improvements in external networks are in + column

Source: Focus group discussion, 2005

8.3 Factors behind the changes

The participants were unable to point out the events or changes that significantly damaged or increased the stock of social capital. They perceived it as spontaneous virtual process. It is difficult to outline the factors that apparently reduced the social capital stock in the communities under people's perception. They believe development of modern transportation and communication infrastructures has accelerated the decline process of social capital. The decline in moral attitudes development of materialistic culture, more independent market based life style, diversified livelihood, more self empowerment and population increase are the possible causes of social capital decline as outlined by the participants during the discussions.

8.4 Summary

The focus group discussion result shows there is decline in social capital stock in all farming communities however there is slight variation among the communities with regard to such decline. There is a decline in all six dimensions of social capital under consideration but in some cases like networks and social norms there are positive changes or incremental aspects too which are shaded by the larger negative changes. The declined trust level, poor participation in collective action deterioration of good social norms has created many problems in the communities which are both indicators and results of such negative changes. Social capital is supposed to be the critical resource for the farming communities after the natural resources and if deteriorated below certain critical level makes the livelihood system more vulnerable. There is a need of wider and in depth understanding about the causes and consequences of such decline of social capital in communities