the abuse of power through corruption, discrimination and exclusion.

Recommendations that flow from this assessment include: apply do-no-harm and conflict sensitive approaches; encourage participation of local people in the design and implementation of development programs; try to ensure that development benefits are not captured by local elites and instead lead to improvements in the livelihoods and strengthen the voice of disadvantaged groups.

None of this is new and in effect it is simply good development practice in any setting. The conflict and the changes it is promoting, however, are sending a loud message that reduction in social inequality and exclusion should be the central theme of development in Nepal. As the authors of the study put it: "The key message was that it mattered less *if* one is poor, and more *why*."

Social exclusion needs to be addressed in a structured and highly visible way. It needs to be addressed both at the policy and institutional level, by opening space for excluded groups across the broad spectrum of development activities, and on the ground through project interventions that result in visibly improved service delivery and livelihoods for poor and excluded groups. More broadly and over time, these changes need to be not just isolated, donor-driven islands of improvement, but part of Nepal's development model that directs benefits to all citizens, no matter what their gender, ethnicity or caste identity.

Escalation of the insurgency over the past few years, coupled with adverse external developments, has created a deep sense of crisis in Nepal. Out of this sense of crisis, however, has come a greater willingness on the part of policy makers to tackle important reforms and confront the social exclusion that has fueled the eight-year insurgency. Key in this effort is Nepal's Poverty Reduction Strategy (PRS), which adopts as two of its four main pillars: (i) ensuring social and economic inclusion of the poor, marginalized groups and less developed region; (ii) vigorously pursuing good governance both as a means of delivering better development results, and ensuring social and economic justice. At the core of the inclusion pillar is a specific commitment that in implementation of the PRS, efforts to reduce gender and ethnic/caste-related disparities will be mainstreamed, and in new programs emphasis will be placed on ensuring equity of access for all, with special attention to the most vulnerable. In addition, the PRS proposes targeted programs for women and the most vulnerable poor ethnic minorities living in remote areas.

The World Bank, together with other donors, is tailoring its country assistance strategy to respond to this challenge and capitalize on the growing realization within Nepal's polity and society that the best conflict prevention is effective, inclusive and transparent development that does not leave a large part of its citizens behind.

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SOCIAL CHANGE IN CONFLICT-AFFECTED AREAS OF NEPAL

This note reports on the findings of a recent DFID-commissioned study to assess social change in conflict areas of Nepal. It looks specifically at the impact on hierarchical relations based on gender, caste and ethnicity. All parts of society have been affected by positive and negative social changes. Most of the positive changes have not yet become imbedded in the fabric of social relations but are enforced through coercion and the threat of violence. The challenge for development actors will be to capitalize on these positive changes and effectively address problems of exclusion and social inequality.

Background

On February 13, 1996 Maoist insurgents attacked the Holeri police post in South Rolpa, marking the start of the conflict in Nepal. Studies of the conflict have identified its root causes as traditional deep-seated political, economic and social exclusion of large parts of the population, based on class, caste, gender, ethnicity, religion, language and geographical isolation. A second and, in the end temporary, cease fire in January 2003 allowed donors and aid agencies to resume and in some cases deepen their work in rural Nepal.

Although there have been numerous studies of the conflict in Nepal, there has been little exploration of how the conflict has influenced social norms, values and relationships, particularly hierarchical relations based on gender, caste and ethnicity. In May 2003, DFID Nepal commissioned an assessment of social change in conflict-affected areas, based on fieldwork in five districts of mid-western and central Nepal.[1]

Fieldwork in May and June 2003 was carried out in Rolpa, Rukum, and Dang in the mid-western region, and Sinhupalchowk and Ramechhap in the central region. Districts visited in the mid-west had experienced intense conflict and central districts less intense. The assessment team visited 19 communities, of which 6 were under the control of the security forces, 7 were in buffer areas, and 6 were under Maoist control. During the district visits the assessment team held discussions with over 150 people, including human rights activists, Chief District Officers, Local Development Officers, police, army officers and other Government officials, victims of the conflict, farmers, students, teachers, civil society actors and local Maoist leaders. The team was also able to attend a number of events, such as the district level interaction on people's agenda for peace in Dang, a Maoist mass meeting in Doramba Ramechhap, and a civil society meeting on peace talk monitoring in Sindhupalcowk.

Limitations on the assessment included a relatively tense and fearful atmosphere within the districts, constraints on the team's mobility, general mistrust and suspicion of outsiders, Maoist views of 'research' that does not bring direct and immediate benefit to communities, and general 'conflict consultation fatigue.'

Women

Women's involvement in the Maoist army and political cadres has brought a major break in the social fabric of rural areas. It is reported that every third guerrilla is a woman and that 70% of women guerrillas are from among indigenous ethnic communities. The girls and women who have joined the Maoists wear combat dress, have discarded all jewelry, and have cropped their hair short; they are full of a liberation vocabulary and newfound confidence that makes ordinary village women rethink traditional values concerning women.

Women and girls who join the Maoists have been systematically subverting the traditional Hindu symbols of the subordination of women. For example, they have rejected the traditional notion of remaining untouchable

[1] Mukta S. Lama-Tamang, Sumitra M. Gurung, Dharma Swarnakar, and Sita Rana Magar. 2003. *Social Change in Conflict Areas: Assessment Report*. Prepared for UK Department for International Development (DFID) Nepal. Rebecca Calder, Social Development Advisor DFID Nepal and Lynn Bennett, Lead Social Scientist World Bank, supported and guided this research. The views in this report do not necessarily reflect DFID Nepal's Policy Position.

during the menstruation period. Use of *pote* (beads) and *sindur* (red vermillion) as a marker of married women has also been discarded by female guerrillas.

Villagers across the districts reported that there has been a considerable decrease in polygamy. Maoist rhetoric emphasizes the 'consensus' of husband and wife in marriage. Villagers also report that cases of domestic violence and neglect of women within households has decreased. Banning uncontrolled sale and public abuse of alcohol is reported to be one of the most popular changes in Maoist-held areas—at least from women's point of view. In many cases, large distilleries were destroyed, and production of alcohol strictly prohibited. With the control of alcohol consumption, associated domestic violence and fights between village youths have also decreased according to local people. Gambling has been drastically reduced in Maoist-held areas. Gamblers are fined and publicly humiliated by the Maoists.

Maoists reported that they provide labor support to farming households headed by widows, especially for those whose male members were killed in the conflict. Women's household and farm-related work burden has increased dramatically because male members have left the villages. Women must now deal with both security forces and Maoists. Traditionally forbidden to plough fields or repair the roofs of houses, women are now taking on these tasks, both out of necessity and because of the egalitarian value system introduced by the Maoists.

It is too early to say to what extent these positive changes are sustainable. The team's observations suggest that, so far, change seems to have taken place due to Maoist action or threat of action. Only through continuous reinforcement of these positive practices by local people will they become sustainable social norms and values.

Dalits

The Maoists have not disclosed the actual proportion of their cadres by ethnicity and caste. Nevertheless, in conversation with Maoist cadres, it appears they are making strenuous efforts to increase the participation from the Dalit[2] population. The rallying point has been elimination of caste-based discrimination and provision of services and opportunities for Dalits in Nepal.

With few exceptions, the team did not hear of any caste-based discriminatory practices within the Maoist themselves. Dalit and non-Dalit Maoists eat and live together. The hierarchy within the Dalit caste system has also been discouraged. Those Dalits who have joined the Maoists are treated equally to non-Dalit cadre. They are not denied entry to houses or temples, have access to water sources, do not have to wash their own dishes, and are addressed respectfully.

The practice of untouchability appears to have decreased in public places across the assessment districts. The team observed two Dalit-run tea shops in Libang, Rolpa, which were being patronized by non-Dalits. There were also several restaurants run by Dalits in urban areas of Dang that had non-Dalit clients. Educated and relatively well-off Dalit males are slowly gaining access to non-Dalit restaurants and no longer have to wash their dishes after use. This change, however, is limited to towns and small markets at road heads only.

A Dalit Maoist said that it had been harder to change the attitude of elders from both Dalit and non-Dalit groups regarding the practices of untouchability. He added that even Dalit youths were somewhat hesitant to break with these age-old practices for fear of retaliation by higher castes.

In Rukum, the practice of denying Dalit children access to schools has been stopped by the Maoists. The use of derogatory language with Dalits is no longer common. A group of Dalit children encountered in Ramechhap explained that non-Dalits have stopped using abusive and discriminatory language because they are afraid of the Maoists.

The traditional *bista* or *khala* system, whereby occupational Dalit castes received grain annually for the services they provided to higher caste households, is gradually coming to an end in districts where Maoists have been active. In Maoist base areas, daily remuneration for labor is the norm.

Despite some direct change for those who have joined the Maoists and those who live in Maoist base areas, most non-Maoist high caste people remain extremely resistant to the break down of the caste system, in particular the practice of untouchability. When high caste households allow Dalit Maoists to enter their homes they generally do so because they do not know their caste identity or they feign ignorance out of fear.

Indigenous Ethnic Groups

Indigenous Tibeto-Burman speaking populations are reported to have been among those most badly affected by the Maoist insurgency in Nepal. The insurgency originated in the Kham Magar heartland of the mid-western region and from there spread across the country. Although the number of indigenous people who have joined the Maoists is not known, the number of people from indigenous groups among the Maoists dead suggests that about two-thirds of the cadres are drawn from indigenous groups.

The Maoists have argued that systematic exclusion and deprivation of indigenous ethnic groups should be addressed as a primary issue in equitable national development and integration. The Maoist platform includes indigenous ethnic groups' right to self-determination, ethnic and regional autonomy, proportional representation, equal language and cultural rights, elimination of caste-based domination, patriarchy and untouchability.

Despite the rhetoric, however, indigenous people who joined the Maoists have not been able to assume high leadership positions within the movement, nor have there been visible positive changes in the livelihoods of indigenous populations. Interactions with the militias, and village and district-level Maoist leaders from indigenous communities suggest that they are aware of this fact, but that positive changes in their relationships with higher castes have more than compensated for the lack of more structural change. More importantly, the conflict has fostered a substantial increase in their awareness of their excluded status and their rights, both among cadres and villagers.

A Tharu former member of Parliament in Dang told the team that despite many negative aspects of the Maoist movement, it does serve as a vehicle for challenging high-caste attitudes toward Tharus. A former Village Development Council (VDC) chairperson in Lisankhu reported that derogatory comments about ethnic groups are now confined to the private conversations of the elite. There is increased awareness among local elites that if they misbehave, they may be physically punished. This suggests that changes in public behavior may not reflect deeper changes in attitudes and belief systems.

Indigenous peoples have developed a sense of pride in their culture and traditions. In the absence of any formal bodies, including elected VDCs, villagers have come together to collectively manage village affairs. Lohdabra, a Tharu village in Dang, has a traditional system of village leadership. The leader (*Matau*) serves a one-year term, and during that year the *Matau* organizes communal labor, support for needy families, and festivals. Villagers in Lohdabra said that their *Matau* had helped villagers not only in the traditional way, but also assisted them in their dealings with the army and Maoists, and is supporting the rehabilitation of victims of violence.

The Maoists have promoted a revival of indigenous peoples' culture and language at the local level. They are fostering the use of local languages in education and other written materials. In Thabang High School in northern Rolpa, the Maoists helped the school give examinations in the local Kham Magar language.

Increased awareness of the institutionalized exclusion of indigenous ethnic communities has encouraged people to question the status quo. People have started to ask questions about why the state has been so much controlled by elites at the district level. Comrade Dhruva, Chair of the Magarat Liberation Front in Rolpa, told the team that the Janajati are increasingly favoring the notion of ethnic autonomy and self-determination as the desired political structure for Nepal. Ethnic autonomy, the right to self-determination and more decentralized governance are high on the agenda of all the ethnic groups.

While there have been significant and positive changes in socio-political awareness and caste, ethnic and gender relations, the conflict has also had a negative impact on local cultures. During the State of Emergency, cultural gatherings were outlawed and people were not able to move freely or attend traditional *melas* (festivals or fairs). As for the Maoists, while on the one hand they claim they are fighting for cultural freedom, on the other hand they have campaigned against traditional cultural ceremonies as economically wasteful and socially unprogressive. In many places, particularly Rolpa and Rukum, Maoists have attempted to replace traditional festivals and rituals with more secular gatherings such as May Day, *Janabadi mela* (democratic fair), People's War Day, and so forth

In some cases local people are particularly vigilant in protecting their cultural practices against these pressures. For example, a group of Tharu youth in Dang reported that they refused to obey Maoists' imposition to stop drinking locally-brewed beer.

Conclusions

While ordinary villagers have suffered the most in the conflict between Maoists and the security forces, all sections of society—women, Dalits, indigenous groups, Hindu high caste, poor and rich alike—have experienced change as a result of conflict and have been forced to find ways to adapt. Although most of the positive changes in social relations are symbolic in nature and are not yet part of the fabric of social relations—they are being enforced by the barrel of the gun—the Maoist insurgency has enabled a questioning of the lack of access to services and

[2] Dalit means literally "the oppressed" and is a new term (adopted from the Dalit movement in India) by former "untouchable" groups in Nepal. It signals their rejection of the hierarchically organized ritual pollution embedded in the caste system and focuses on what they see as the inherent lack of justice in Hindu society.