

## **Harka Gurung's Contribution in Regional Development of Nepal**

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### **Regional Development in Nepal**

Formal exercise for regional planning has not been a regular phenomenon in Nepal. What is there is the regional development strategy, which has never been a strong basis for consideration of spatial dimension in national development endeavors. Since 1970, regional development strategy has been occupying a place in the successive periodic plans of Government of Nepal. The Fourth Plan (1970-75), for the first time, adopted an elaborate spatial strategy for development (NPC, 1970). And in the context of a major policy with regard to the concentration of limited resources, regional dimension of development within the framework of the growth –centered approach was incorporated as one of the major objectives and policies of this plan. Later, the idea of concentrating development activities along the growth axis in order to integrate the elevation zones with comparative advantages was replaced by the concept of diffused activities across development regions. This shift in emphasis is well reflected in all the succeeding periodic plans of the country.

One distinct change of emphasis has been from specific regional development approach to rural development in the country. Such change of emphasis commenced with the introduction of Small Area Development Programme (SADP) as a part of the regional development strategy in the Fifth Plan (NPC, 1975). Later, it was replaced by the Integrated Rural Development Projects. (IRDPs), which became the focus of development approach in the Sixth and Seventh Plans (Shrestha, 1981; NPC, 1980; NPC, 1985). Later, the IRDPs did not continue to be a part of the regional development policy as such projects ceased to exist one after another (Gurung, 1990). In its place, rural development with emphasis either on backward rural areas or on poverty groups has been introduced (NPC, 1990; Shrestha, 2006). During the last two decades, the major shift has been on the development of remote areas and backward and poverty groups. It is important to note that regional development strategy is not simply a rural development programme or a development of backward areas and poverty groups.

Despite relevant policy pronouncement, progress in the direction of reduction of regional disparity is slow. This is mainly due to the planning approach with primacy of sectoral planning (Gurung, 1999; Shrestha, 2006). In this respect, regional development policy remains simply a routine affair without integration with sectoral planning.

## **Harka Gurung as Pioneer in Developing Regional Development Approach in Nepal**

For the first time in the country, Harka Gurung made an effort in developing a spatial strategy for development in Nepal. He carried out an intensive exercise for developing a regional development strategy which he formulated for the Fourth Plan of the country (Gurung; 1969). It was really the first formal exercise for regional planning in Nepal. The regional development strategy developed by Gurung for the Fourth Plan tried to establish three pioneering concepts in national development efforts. These are:-

- Need of inception of spatial dimension in sectoral planning,
- Regional strategy for development, and
- Development of backward areas.

This regional development strategy envisaged a series of north-south axes or development corridors linking diverse regions in both east-west and north-south directions (NPC, 1970: Appendix XIII). Growth centres were an integral component of growth axis. The most important aspect of this growth centre approach is the positive nature of polarized development as it takes place whereby the growth spreads to surrounding areas (Gurung, 2005)

Despite some obvious limitations of the growth centre approach as noted by several researchers, Harka Gurung continued to believe till his last day that this strategy was a relevant approach for regional development of Nepal (Gurung, 2005). Only one exception of Gurung's formal exercise for regional planning in Nepal was an exercise made by the National Planning Commission for incorporating the regional development planning in the Eight and Ninth plans (NPC, 1989). However, this exercise was not incorporated in the plans, notwithstanding the fact that the basic principles of this exercise were endorsed by the National Development Council, the apex planning body. Therefore, no formal document of the government as a part of regional planning in Nepal exists now except for the one developed by Harka Gurung.

It was with the formalization of Harka Gurung's exercise that regional development approach has been a continuous policy option in successive periodic plans of the country.

### **Harka Gurung's Concern About Strategic Changes in Regional Development Approach and Spatial Structure**

#### **Concern About Strategic Changes in Regional Development Approach**

The most critical strategic change in regional development approach in the country had been from regional development to rural development. Such changes of emphasis commenced with the introduction of the Small Area Development Programme (SADP) as

a part of the regional development strategy in the Fifth Plan of the country. Harka Gurung was very critical about this change. With his critical comments on this as the Vice-Chairman of National Planning Commission, efforts were made to link SADPs with development corridors and growth centres. SADPs were implemented in 10 backward districts but without success with the provision of integration of the projects with growth centres. Later, the growth centre approach discontinued in the successive periodic plans. Harka Gurung was of the opinion that these changes distorted the regional strategy of national economic integration (Gurung, 2005). He argued that three elements contributed to the distortion of the regional strategy. First, the practice of giving sanctity to the formal development regions for programming led to emphasis on balance among five regions, rather than reducing imbalance among the elevation zones (mountain, hill and terai). The original idea of concentrating development activities along the growth axes in order to integrate the elevation zones with comparative advantages was replaced by a model of diffused activity across development regions. Regional strategy was interpreted as a wholesale dispersal instead of judicious aggregation of projects. Second, over emphasis given to Small Area Development Programme during the Fifth plan was another element which contributed to the distortion of regional strategy. Third, the emergence and expansion of various integrated rural development projects (IRDPs) also distorted the regional strategy. Seemingly, the other later developments like Basis Need Approach, Backward area development programme and Poverty alleviation programme were other elements that distorted the regional development strategy in the country.

### Concern about Spatial Structure

Harka Gurung believed that sub-national terrestrial units should be changed to make them capable of responding to the emerging needs. He voiced this need as early as 1975 when he proposed 5 development regions, 40 districts by consolidating existing 75 districts and reduction of VDCs. This proposal for consolidation of districts and reduction of the number of VDCs was rejected due to political consideration (Gurung, 2006:18).

Later, Harka Gurung proposed a need of four levels of administrative development units (Gurung, 2006:23). The proposed spatial hierarchy is provided in Table 1.

Table 1. Proposed Spatial Hierarchy

Order	Designation	No. of Units	Functional Regime
First Order	Development Region	5	Planning & Development
Second Order	Administrative District	25	Administrative & Development
Third Order	Sub-District	75	Development & Service Delivery
Fourth Order	Village Committee & Municipality	3000	Development & Service Delivery

Source: Harka Gurung 2006.

According to Harka Gurung, the functional roles of each hierarchy would be as follows.

- Development regions were designated as the first order spatial unit and their primary function would be developmental with emphasis on economic integration of eco-zones. Each region should have a Regional Development Council.
- The consolidated 25 districts should constitute the second tier. These districts should have administrative and developmental functions. The existing 75 districts would be sub-districts with the functions of developmental and service delivery. The reduced number of VDCs and municipalities would constitute the fourth tier hierarchy with the functional roles of developmental and service delivery.

According to Harka Gurung, the need of consolidation of the existing 75 districts into 25 was based on two reasons (Gurung, 2003). First, the much extension of roads, airports and telecommunication facilities has narrowed geographic space in terms of travel time enabling the administration of much larger area. Second, reduction in the number of districts would logically be a measure to economize administrative cost.

### **Harka Gurung's Main Thrusts on Regional Policy Initiatives and Implementation Mechanism**

According to Harka Gurung, major thrusts on regional policy initiatives and implementation mechanism are related to seven aspects which are i) spatial orientation, ii) land use planning, iii) transport access, iv) industrial location, v) urban system, vi) decentralization and vii) organizational change (Gurung, 2006). His interpretations of these aspects are as follows:-

#### *i) Spatial reorientation*

There is need for spatial reorientation for a more balanced development through:

- integration of highland and lowland economics based on product specialization, and
- extension of the Tibet connection for development of remote mountain areas.

#### *ii) Land use planning*

Macro level land use planning is essential to :

- device rational allocation and use of land resources, and
- resolve conflicts between sectoral master plans (forestry, agriculture and irrigation).

*iii) Transport access*

The priorities for transport access should be:

- extension of roads to link Tibet
- road access to potential hydropower project sites, and
- extension of air service with better regulation of domestic airlines.

*iv) Industrial location*

The following categories of industrial location are needed:

- industrial complex at major road junctions/along the East-west Highway,
- industrial district for small and medium scale industries at appropriate locations in the highlands, and
- large and medium size industries diverted outside the Kathmandu valley by levying high investmental surcharge.

*v) Urban System*

To rationalize the urban system in the country the following measures should be undertaken

- location should be designated as urban on functional basis, and
- a three-tier urban hierarchy of regional centres, district headquarters and service centres should be established

*vi) Decentralization*

The following should be made:

- consolidation of administrative districts from the present 75 to 25 and drastic reduction in the number of VDCs and municipalities,
- devolution of functions to DDC & VDCs with more tax authority, and
- local bodies to be given a share in the revenue generated from the extraction of natural resources within their areas.

*vii) Organizational change*

The following organizational changes are needed:

- changing NPC members functional divisions from sectoral to regional assignment
- strengthening regional offices of the ministries with delegation of adequate authority, and
- establishing a regional development council in each region.

## Conclusion

Regional development approach in national development endeavors in Nepal has its beginning with Harka Gurung. It was Harka Gurung who created an intellectual basis

for discussion on regional development in Nepal. It was Harka Gurung who introduced a tradition for undertaking regional development exercise as a part of formal planning process in the country. It was Harka Gurung who developed a base for later initiatives of regional development strategy in the country in one form or the other. Whenever people talk and think about regional development in Nepal, Harka Gurung will be remembered as a pioneer.

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