

Theory and practice of non-governmental organizations in Nepal

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ABSTRACT

The emergence and existence of Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) are always the subject of interest for development practitioners and scholars. NGOs are regarded as the nation's third sector after the state and the market. Worldwide, NGOs emerged as the anti-slavery and women suffrage movement in the mid-nineteenth century. In case of Nepal, centuries-old history of ethnic social groups working for community welfare are found. Dozens of theories could be used to explain the increasing formal engagement of NGOs in several sectors of development over the past 70 years. Based on meta-analysis, the article analyses and compares the theories on emergence of NGOs, and their practices in the Nepalese context. The paper concludes that the dramatic growth of NGOs is driven by the failure of the government to flexible service delivery, ease to address social issues, regulate the private spheres, backstopping right rules, incentives, resources of a social movement and their role in the modernization process.

Keywords: Advocacy, Grassroot, Network, Social Welfare Council

INTRODUCTION

The concept of Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) is found to vary according to the social, political, and economic environment of the area (Mayhew, 2005). There are some literatures that acknowledge NGOs as conveyors of development, also some that question the very existence of the NGOs and consider them as a double-edged sword (Ismail, 2018). A general understanding is that NGOs are non-profit organizations that work or advocate for the welfare of society. Paradoxically, Johnson and Prakash (2007) expressed NGOs as a non-profit organization that requires profit to function properly. Either way, it has been clear that NGOs are not a magic bullet for the welfare of the society, but a stimulus to change (Green and Matthias, 1995; Hilhorst *et al.*, 2010).

A well-acknowledged existence of NGOs is that as a third sector besides the state and the market. It is especially true for the developing countries where neither the state nor the market is powerful enough to bring about development and strengthen civil society (Drabek, 1987; Makoba, 2002). They are the mediator, translator, and networker of social development (Gellner, 2019). However, some criticize the notion of 'NGOs as a third sector' as a

westernized concept (Hemment, 2004).

Pearce (2000) argues that NGOs have been facing an existential crisis. They lie somewhere between the government and the private sector or between political parties and the grassroots social movements. It is argued that the role of NGOs is subjected to constant change and their multiple roles are to be understood in the context of their relationship with the stakeholders of development, problem definition, time frame, scope, and the major actors.

Nepal has a long informal history and a relatively short formal history regarding NGO development. NGOs are recognized as a development partner and the one to enhance the Nepalese quality of life (Singh, 2013). A broader concept of NGO by Dhakal (2002) encompasses all the non-governmental organizations from grassroots to international, traditional to contemporary with diversity in capacity, objectives, and motivation. They are found to facilitate democratization, human empowerment, and local actions. They are quicker to advocate, act, and respond to the issues, although they are faced with several criticisms and challenges.

In this background, this paper addresses the various aspects of the theories and practices of NGOs in Nepalese context. In order to address the objectives of the study, the paper has been framed according to the research questions as follows; i) In what context NGOs are emerging in the Nepalese society? ii) What are the socio-economic contributions of the NGOs in development? iii) What are the theories that explain the reasons behind? and iv) What are the multiple issues regarding the implementation of development activities?

METHODS AND METHODOLOGY

The meta-analytic procedure was adopted from the independent studies of the same subject to conceptualize the trend in order to examine the context (Glass and Smith 1981). Meta-analysis permits both the documentation of the informal standards within a field of research and recommendations for future work in that area (Levitt *et al.* 2017). A meta-analysis of qualitative

literature is rather rare (Levitt, 2018). Like quantitative meta-analysis, these methods aggregate findings and identify patterns across primary studies, but their aim, procedures and methodological consideration may vary. The reviewed literature included the topic particularly on the emergence of NGOs in the Nepalese context and the related theories, their socio-economic contribution, major regulating and operating guidelines of implementation.

DISCUSSION

3.1 Emergence of NGOs in society

The history of NGOs is said to be as old as the society itself that started as a welfare and relief services movement, and gradually extended towards funding and implementing self-help projects, as facilitator or catalysts of local development efforts (Drabek, 1987). As reported by Korten (1990), four major generations of NGOs can be recognized (Table 1).

*Table 1
Typology of NGOs and their relationship with the problem definition, time and scope*

Typology	Criteria of classification			
	Problem definition	Time frame	Scope	Program/projects
First generation	Shortage, immediate needs and welfare	Immediate response	Individual, family, community	Rehabilitation, supply-driven
Second generation	Building self-reliant and local development initiatives	Medium	Community, national & global	Medium-term projects & program
Third generation	Sustainability and influencing policy through advocacy	Long term & continuous	Regional, national & global	Long term outcome/impact
Fourth generation	Long term aim of change and structure change	Long term & continuous	National	Behavior change, institutionalized

Adapted from Korten (1990)

3.2 The origin, development and institutionalization of NGOs in the Nepalese context

Historically, several informal forms of NGOs, like *Parma* (exchange of labor force in agriculture), *Guthi* (a type of institutional land ownership), were in existence and are still functional. The establishment of the Charkha movement in 1923 by Tulasi Meher Shrestha is said to be the first of the formal kind (Bhandari, 2014).

Nepal was under the autocratic rana regime up until 1951. NGOs, during the autocratic period, were considered a threat to the government and their activities were limited to the interests of the rulers. They were mostly capital-based. But they continued to work behind-the-scene during these hard times too (Bhandari, 2014). The Charkha movement in 1923 by Tulasi Meher Shrestha came into existence. The massive earthquake in 1934 gave rise to many volunteer aid societies. Bhukampa Sewa Dal and Maharaja Servant Society emerged during the period as a disaster relief response, although they disappeared after a few years (Singh, 2013). In 1937, Nepal Nagarik Adhikar Samiti (The Committee for Citizens' Rights in Nepal) was established in order to aware the citizens of their rights (Tanaka, 2010).

The end of the autocratic Rana regime in 1951 opened the path to more formal NGOs and international NGOs. But again, the party less *Panchayat* system by King Mahendra from 1960 marked the authoritarian regime up until 1990. During this time, social activities were only for charity and addressing human rights. The Social Services National Coordination Council (SSNCC) was established and headed by the Queen. The NGOs were, thus, under the benefaction of the palace and were far from democracy.

The restoration of democracy in 1990 served as an impetus for the exponential growth of NGOs in Nepal. The Social Welfare Council (SWC) replaced SSNCC and the rules were more flexible for the

I/NGOs to operate in the country (Ismail, 2018). They were addressed as the development partners, officially in the Ninth Five Year Plan of the government (1997-2002) and by the Local Self Governance Act 1999.

Later, with the resurgence of the Maoist movement from 1996 to 2006, NGOs were politically and morally attacked. Ulvila and Hossain (2002) reported the harassment of Save the Children Fund in Gorkha district and Plan International in Makwanpur district. However, the Maoists later accepted and acknowledged the role of NGOs in the peace-building process and as mediators of People Movement 2006 (Ismail, 2018).

Nepal has a strong established NGO sector, emerged out from oppressive political and social contexts. Currently, there are 50,385 NGOs and 245 INGOs working in Nepal. Still, it is astonishing to know that only 15-20 per cent of the registered are active. Although there are concerns regarding the increasing number of NGOs in Nepal, it has been viewed as a positive sign to connect the locals to the globalizing platform (Bhandari, 2014).

The first action of the then government to institutionalize the NGOs was the formulation of the Societies Registration Act in 1959. According to this act, organizations could register themselves in any government sector as per their discipline. But this created an unintegrated system and led to the formulation of the Organization and Association Act 1977 and Social Service National Coordination Council Act 1977, in order to make the process more uniform. The major problem in the SSNCC act was found to be the registration procedure. Based on this, any NGOs had to visit the office of SSNCC in Kathmandu to register. This was challenging to the grassroots organizations and those based outside the Kathmandu Valley. In response, the Social Welfare Act was formulated in 1992, replacing SSNCC Act provisioning the flexible registration procedure that could be done in the respective District Administration Office.

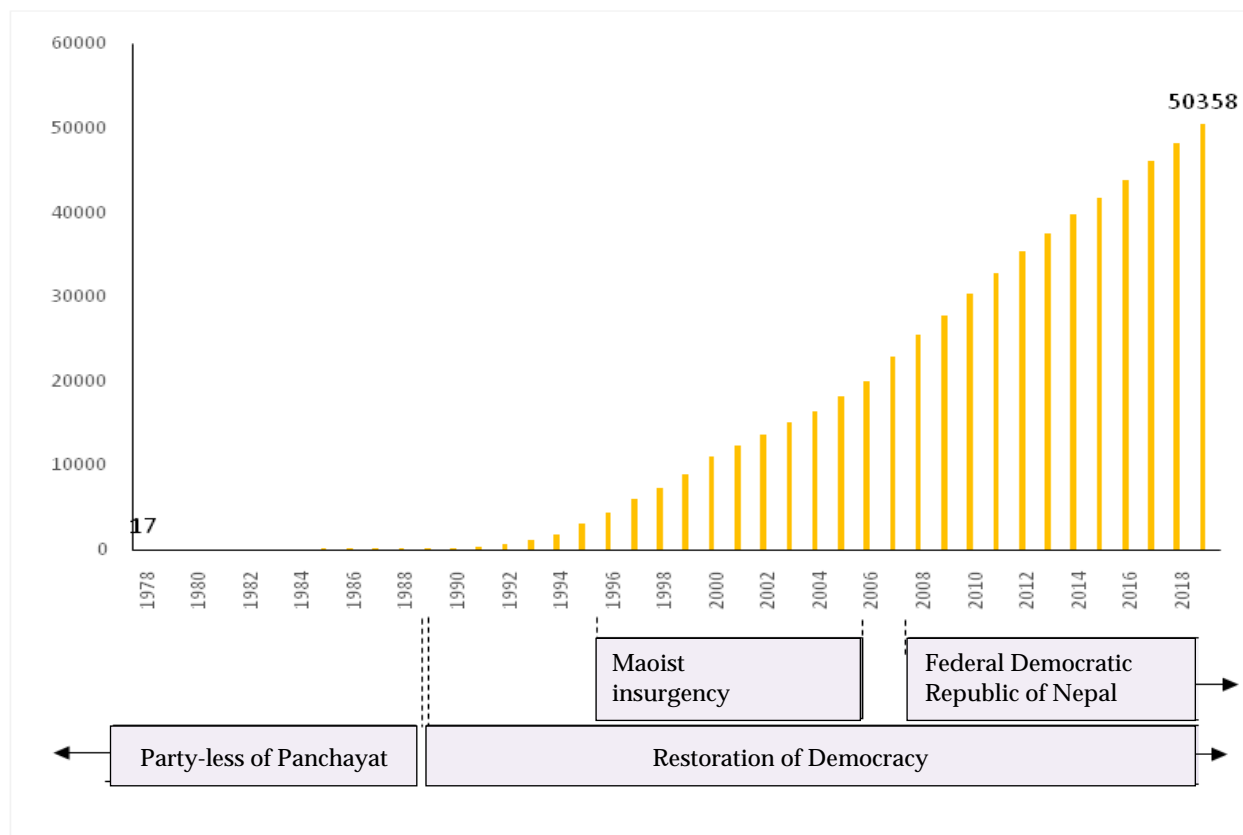


Figure 1. Number of NGOs registered in SWC, Nepal

Source: SWC, 2020

The constitution of Nepal 2015 has given the fundamental rights to form unions and associations. The Social Welfare Council (SWC) and District Administration Office (DAO) are involved in the governance of the I/NGOs. The Social Welfare Council is a government body, under the Ministry of Women, Children and Senior Citizens (MOWCSC), established under the Social Welfare Act 1992 to regulate and monitor NGOs. At the present time, some legislations to govern I/NGOs are; National Guidance Act 1961, Associations Registration Act 1977, Social Welfare Act 1992, Foreign Currency Exchange Act 1962, Poverty Alleviation Fund Act 2006, Companies Act 2006, etc. SWC and DAO are directly involved in registration, affiliation, approval of General Agreement and Project Agreement, renewal, monitoring evaluation and investigation of the I/NGOs in Nepal. In the present federal context, the institutional support for NGOs has reached the local levels too (Ghimire, 2019).

3.3 Theoretical perspectives of NGO

Theoretical description of the emergence of NGOs is a major objective of this paper. In spite of their advantages, NGOs have significant limitations that constrain their ability to respond to public problems. In addition to market and government failure, being the source of their emergence, there are voluntary failures that make them interdependent on government and business sectors (Salamon, 1987). These include philanthropic insufficiency, the difficulty in generating the resources often needed to "scale up" their operations; and philanthropic paternalism, and difficulty in fostering a true sense of self-reliance. The table below shows the link between the development theories and implications of the NGOs so as to illustrate the development views and to bring different views to see the NGOs.

Table 2
Summary of the theoretical perspective to describe the emergence of NGOs

Theory	Description
Economic theory	The question of whether a public project should be owned by an NGO or by the government has been studied in economics using the tools of the contracting theory. It can also be viewed from the relationship and partnership viewpoint. Nonprofit organizations are often active in a field before the government can be mobilized to respond. They therefore often develop expertise, structures, and experience that governments can draw on in their own activities.
Contract failure theory	NGOs provide and satisfy the demand for public goods of the people which are unfilled or underfilled by the government and the market. Contract failure theory describes a situation in which the consumer of a good or service is unable to evaluate its quality, thus incentivizing the producer to produce a lower quality good or service. Such behavior creates sub-optimal economic conditions.
Trust theory	NGOs were lauded for their participatory approach to the development and enhancement of the livelihoods, rights, and democratization process of the poorest segments of society through various social development projects and programs.
Supply-side theory	Social entrepreneurs with some incentives create NGOs on demand of the community people. The supply-side theory is an economic theory built on the concept that increasing the supply of goods leads to economic growth and this supply is promoted by NGOs and development agencies. A second condition is needed for nonprofit organizations to emerge: namely, the presence of "social entrepreneurs", people with an incentive to create nonprofit organizations to meet such demand (James, 1987).
Welfare state theory	The welfare state theories take it for a given that the provision of state-provided welfare services displaces NGOs work. The theory ignores the NGO sector and its history in both policy issues and development debates completely. The theorists view the nonprofit sector as an essentially pre-modern mechanism for dealing with social problems that, like the family, the Church, and the feudal system lost their function with the growth of the market system and the expansion of the state's responsibilities to deal with populations with little economic value.
Modernization theory	The role of NGOs is not mentioned. Modernization theory was best known for transforming traditional countries into a modern nation that have been developed through western ideas and model through external agencies and development partners.
Dependency theory	Social movement through NGOs is the source of revolutionary change. NGOs have mushroomed in the wake of the failure and demise of the dominant development paradigms such as modernization and dependency theory, offering an alternative to development practice and responding to the needs of the most vulnerable.

Institutionalism theory	NGOs are the three main institutional sectors: rights, rules and incentives. Institutional structures developed in industrialized countries are viewed by policymakers, donors, and other states as signals of progress towards modern institutional development and hence worthy of financial support.
Neoliberalism theory	NGOs are the flexible cost-effective service delivery. Ulleberg (2009) argues that as actors in the development discourse, NGOs have stepped up as the main service providers in countries where the government has failed to perform its duties to the citizens.
Alternative development theory	NGOs could challenge the top-down approach of development and mainstream development orthodox. They have been recognized for their decentralized role and grassroots engagement with the world's poorest and marginalized, representing their voice and empowering them to break free from the shackles of poverty and alleviating social ills such as illiteracy and poor health.
Post-development theory	NGOs are destroying the local culture and economies. Local social movements can resist these processes. NGOs are mainly the agent to promote capitalism in the name of providing credit, skill training, and other related capacity build-up activities.
Theory of private politics	Baron (2010) shows NGOs can emerge when socially concerned individuals coordinate their efforts in the spirit of social issues. Their motivation may arise from moral preference and prosocial behaviors and may depend on how well activities subscribe to the issues.
Theory of optimal regulation	To maintain and regulate the private companies, firms and industries NGOs could play the role to address optimal regulation, the central issue of regulatory economics - how to regulate firms in a way that induces them to produce and price optimally. Optimal regulation synthesizes the major findings of extensive theoretical literature on what constitutes optimality in various situations.
Public good theory	Government is unable to fulfill the demand of voters where government failure creates the NGO innovation to handle heterogeneous problems of the society (Ghatak 1998 and Shamim 2015).

Adapted from James (1987); Lewis and Kanji (2009); Ulleberg (2009); Baron (2010)

3.4 Contribution of NGOs in the development of Nepalese society

NGOs in Nepal is considered an important member of civil society (Dahal and Timsina, 2006). A formal NGOs governing body, Social Welfare Council, defines an NGO as a welfare organization established with the genuine motive of social service without the intention of profit generation and organizational welfare (SWC, 2015). NGOs taking on such tasks have demonstrated strengths as well as presented challenges. Strengths include easy access to local communities, a better understanding

of local contexts, quick and flexible response mechanism, and access to marginalized populations and under-served areas, increasing self-reliance and knowledge (Ito *et al.*, 2005; Chapagain and Banjade, 2009). NGOs have played a vital role in poverty alleviation, advocating, creating awareness of citizen's rights, and helping people to help themselves (Dhakai, 2002; Sharma, 2011). They are active in raising awareness on women's rights to equal citizenship and women empowerment (Pant and Standing, 2011). However, the concerns of program sustainability, weak collaboration, and aid dependency exists (Upadhaya *et al.*, 2014).

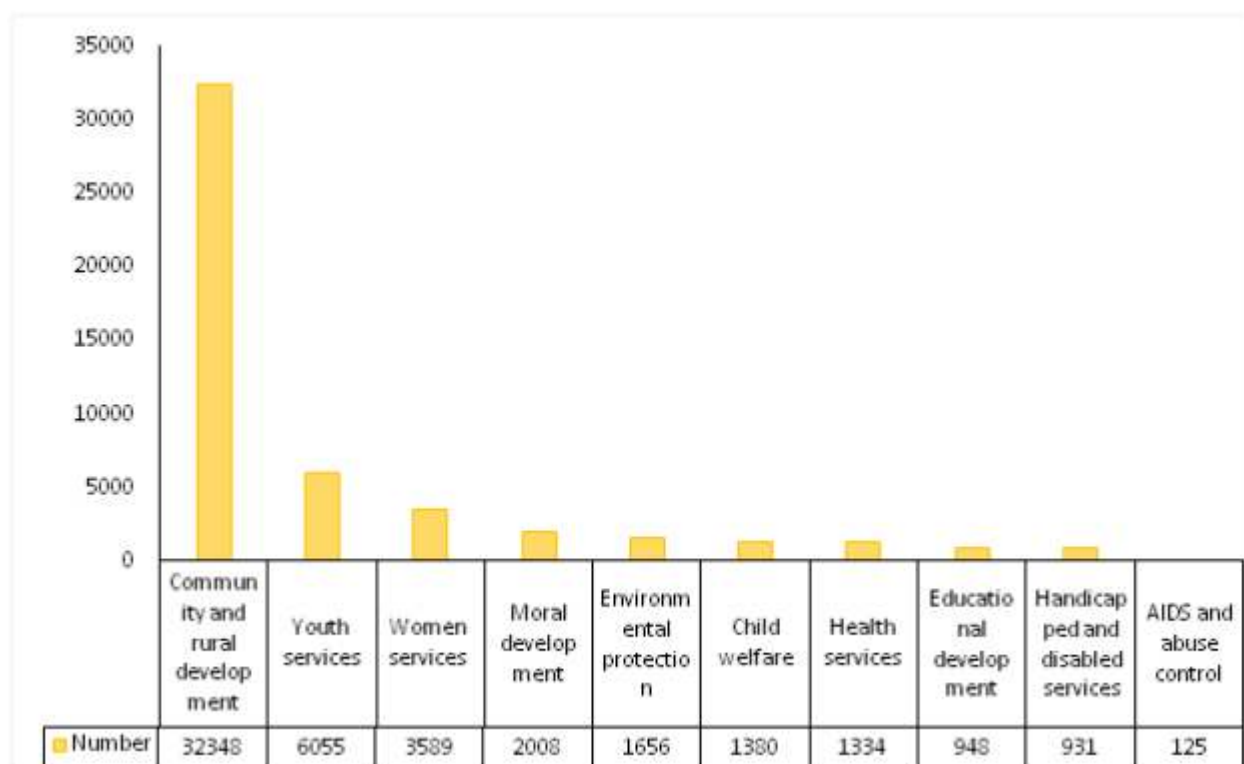


Figure 2. Sector-wise registered NGOs

Source: SWC, 2020b

NGOs have become the major actors in the socioeconomic process of development, especially during political instability and conflict management, and humanitarian interventions. NGOs working on the human rights sector and its network become credible actors for political change during a crucial period in Nepalese history (Shrestha and Adhikari, 2011). Their contribution has been significant in the field of health, environmental conservation, and human rights (Pant and Standing, 2011; Bhandari, 2014; Dahal and Cao, 2015). INGOs through official development assistance invest in more than 25 sectors of development (Table provided as appendix). However, the amount and trend of change are unstable, nonlinear, and unforecastable.

In general, NGOs in Nepal work with or through Community Based Organizations and functional groups, such as Community Forest User Groups (CFUG), which are mostly based on geographic boundaries or single functions (Tanaka, 2010).

3.5 Issues of implementation of NGOs in Nepal

The functioning of the NGOs is always challenging in Nepal, mainly because of the political instability, weak legislation, and the implicit behavior of the organization. During the autocratic regime, NGOs were the workers of the rulers and merely the development workers. During the Maoists insurgency, they were attacked and blamed as the puppet of foreign donors and mediums to implement foreign interest in Nepal. Several issues have been reported in the policies and SWC, such as over flexible laws, lack of clearly specified protocols, politicization, and bureaucratization of SWC, lack of SWC capacity, and lack of clear functional role demarcation (Dhakal, 2007). Although the NGOs are said to be non-political, the connection to politics exists; either tacitly or at an individual personal level. The same person may be a political member and later may associate with NGOs or vice versa. This practice has been referred to as 'hybridity' by Gellner (2019).

According to Bhandari (2014), almost all of the NGOs in Nepal are not self-sustained and the government can barely help them financially. Their lifespan depends on the aid they receive. While they depend on donors, their objectives and activities are adjusted to comply with those of the donors. Their ultimate purpose is to sustain themselves, for which they need to keep themselves in power and keep on influencing the people with their products and services. This very existential crisis has created confusion in their roles and weakened their position. They are not being able to answer what they are doing and who they are working for. Because of this, they are more subjected to upward accountability rather than downward accountability. In order to know their worth of existence, critical thought, practice, and discussions could answer them rather than the well-phrased technical report (Ghosh, 2009; Pearce, 2000; Singh and Ingdal, 2007).

In the national organizational sphere, NGOs are growing in number and have been able to create their institutional space but various factors such as lack of effective coordination, weak financial base, lack of professionalism, lack of monitoring and evaluation, lack of transparency, lack of commitment among the NGO activists, and also the absence of public surveillance are the key issues affecting NGO governance in Nepal. This has, in turn, affected the NGOs for efficient management, resource mobilization, and policy advocacy. Such a phenomenon poses difficulty in NGO governance and often becomes the subject of criticism of these entities (Dhakal, 2007). The most prominent issue of

NGOs including development partners is lacking harmonization and synchronization among and between them and the Government of Nepal (Adhikari, 2017).

CONCLUSION

The meta-analysis is presented on the evolution, development and importance of NGOs in respect to the theories and practices in Nepal. What we found is that most aid agencies, especially in the end of and aftermath of the Cold War, bilateral and multilateral 'aid' agencies have strongly advocated a 'New Policy Agenda', which gives eminence to the origin and development of NGOs and community-based organizations. The practice of NGOs including bilateral and multilateral support continues to play an important role in sustaining the socio-economic development of Nepal. This assistance on the economic and technical cooperation only contributes up to twenty percent of the annual budget of Nepal. In a nutshell, the number of NGOs in the country is increasing in response to the various conditions as reflected by the theories which include government failure to flexible service delivery, ease to address social issues, regulate the private spheres, backstopping right rules, incentives, and resources of a social movement. NGOs in Nepal are showing encouraging performance in the sector of rehabilitation, capacity building, socio-economic change, and behavioral change. However, their sustainability remains the major concern and this could be addressed by the concrete policies and development of responsible administration.

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APPENDIX

Appendix 1. Investment by INGOs through Official Development Assistance (in US\$ Million)

Sector	2011/12	2012/13	2013/14	2014/15	2015/16	2016/17	2017/18	2018/19
Education	229	141	175.1	113.7	111.55	127.24	202	242
Energy	107	91	58.2	48.6	150.58	72.20	117	221
Reconstruction	43	37	46.9	NA	48.39	72.19	50	153
Health	85	129	115.7	177.7	103.44	89.58	145	87
Drinking water	27	42	38.8	71.0	42.29	110.09	68	57
Transportation	117	109	51.6	86.6	46.17	83.30	78	38
Agriculture	46	38	44.2	50.7	48.10	59.23	77	29
Science technology	NA	14	31.4	16.0	54.18	28.73	20	23
Alternative energy	14	12	13.9	20.2	14.29	NA	5	19
Social development	34	29	NA	18.3	23.81	30.71	4	14
Economic reform	35	35	46.7	39.4	41.44	35.11	211	12
Others	60	82	75.7	85.7	39.99	70.90	161	48
Local development	153	118	152.3	124.9	119.15	123.00	136	133
Urban	15	NA	13.3	32.8	40.35	80.80	149	89
Economic	19	NA	11.9	NA	1.79	37.43	22	84
Financial reform	NA	NA	12.3	NA	32.28	13.12	9	109
Commerce	NA	14	NA	NA	11.02	NA	20	30
Tourism	NA	NA	30.8	NA	NA	NA	2	15
Women/children	13	NA	NA	NA	10.57	13.34	10	13
Home affairs	NA	NA	NA	43.7	15.66	13.51	28	12
Livelihood	20	15	NA	26.7	20.45	26.50	NA	NA
Forest	16	12	42.8	23.0	17.27	NA	NA	NA
Irrigation	12	NA	14.5	11.8	14.41	22.18	NA	NA
Miscellaneous	NA	NA	NA	NA	12.47	26.11	22	11

Note: NA means Not Available

Source: Development Cooperation Report, Ministry of Finance