

Sustainable Development in Rural Nepal: The Gender and Poverty Perspective for NEWAH's Safe Drinking Water Programme

KELLY F. CORLEY & RAJU KADKA, *Nepal Water for Health, Kathmandu, Nepal*

ABSTRACT

Nepal is a country that is natural resource rich and economically poor. Nepal Water for Health (NEWAH), a non-governmental organisation working in the water sector, is attempting to improve its programmes to incorporate women and the poor in order to provide social and economic opportunities for all. This gender and poverty approach, still in its early childhood, is already showing signs of success for NEWAH as well as the communities these programmes are implemented in.

KINGDOM OF NEPAL

The mountainous Kingdom of Nepal is nestled between the world's two population giants, India and China. Often forgotten between these two countries, Nepal remains home to eight of the world's ten highest mountain peaks including the illustrious Sagarmatha (Mount Everest), and provides some of the last natural habitats for the rapidly disappearing Bengal tiger in its national parks. Nepal's soaring mountains in the North give way to steep hills dotted with villages leading into the flat, fertile plains of the Terai in the South. This unique landscape, all held within 147,181 km² of land, has produced extensive rivers, streams and underground reservoirs that form the backbone of life both urban and rural (Sharme, 1992). Of the 24 million inhabitants in the country, only 9.2% live in urban areas. The remaining Nepalese are spread out into rural communities ranging over all areas of the country. While Nepal provides some of the most spectacular scenery in the world, its terrain makes development, communication and transport difficult.

The 2000 Human Development Report ranked Nepal as one of the least developed countries in the world, ranking 144th out of 174. According to Nepal's 1996-97 National Planning Commission (NPC), roughly 42% of the population lives below the poverty line (those earning less than \$1 US per day), with rural areas typically more impoverished than urban (Bajracharya, 2001). Nearly 90% of the population is involved in agricultural work and most depend on subsistence agriculture to survive (Sharme, 1992).



Figure 1
Members of a GAP water users committee after completing training

Unfortunately, most are still unable to produce enough food year-round to feed their families. Almost 2/3 of the adult population cannot read or write and many children are deprived of an education because they are

TABLE 1. NEPAL STATISTICS*

- It is estimated that 24 million people live in Nepal
- The population growth rate is set at 2.7%
- Infant mortality (per 1000 live births) is 72
- 38% of the adult population can read and write, 21% of adult females are literate
- GNP per capita is \$210 (US)
- % of the population without access to safe water (1990-96): 56% (12 million people)
- % of the population without access to sanitation (1990-96): 62% (14 million people)

* Human Development in South Asia (2000). The Gender Question. Mahbub ul Haq Human Development Centre: Oxford, England.

needed to assist in household chores. Though Nepal has an abundance of water, less than half the population has access to safe drinking water (Bajracharya, 2001). Even fewer have knowledge and use of proper sanitation practices (Table 1).

Included among the large number of poor in Nepal are women and girls. Nepal, the only Hindu state in the world, follows a patriarchal social structure where males are still preferred to females and the education of boys is more important than that of girls. This leads to the continued subjugation of women by men. This is evident by the lack of women's decision-making power outside of their homes and women's lack of equal economic, political and human freedoms compared to men. Boys tend to be favoured in everything from feeding practices to education. Many families see a girl's education as an unjustifiable expense. This is best illustrated by the saying, "to educate a girl is like watering a neighbour's tree; you have the trouble and expense of nurturing the plant but the profit goes to someone else" (UNICEF, 1996). The most striking aspect of this inequality is the amount of time women spend collecting water on a daily basis, sometimes up to six hours in one day. Women are also responsible for the health and well-being of the family, yet few are aware of proper health and sanitation practices that are needed to treat and prevent diseases such as diarrhoea and dysentery (Table 2).

GENDER AND POVERTY RECOGNITION

Beginning in the mid-1990s, a non-profit organisation providing rural Nepalese communities with safe drinking water, known as Nepal Water for Health (NEWAH), began to recognise the important roles women and the poor play in sustainable development, especially in the development and management of water systems in rural Nepal. Typically, women and girls spend anywhere from one to six hours each day collecting water for household use, yet they are rarely invited to participate in water users committees nor in the site selection for future tube wells and tap stands. Despite efforts to promote health and sanitation, the poor still suffer from water-borne diseases. They simply can not take the time out of their physically demanding days to attend health education



Figure 2
Men and women sharing household work after Gender and Poverty awareness training

training, much less afford the down payment on a latrine. NEWAH realised that without the inclusion of marginalised groups in the creation of water systems, the water systems created will only continue to serve the needs of the Nepalese upper classes rather than providing benefits for all.

NEPAL WATER FOR HEALTH

NEWAH has been a non-profit organisation since 1992 and is currently one of the leading agencies in the Nepalese water sector. NEWAH is currently in the process of completing 54 projects for the 2000–2001 fiscal year. A NEWAH project is completed in a cycle of roughly one year in which partner organisations; selected by NEWAH, work with NEWAH and communities to provide leadership, training and mediation to the residents. The community is responsible for selecting members to serve on the water users committee as well as to serve as Health Motivators, Sanitation Workers and pump and tap stand Maintenance Workers. NEWAH's goal is to help each community organise

TABLE 2. ACCORDING TO NEWAH DATA GATHERED FROM GAP SURVEY REPORTS TAKEN BEFORE PROJECT IMPLEMENTATION IN THE SPRING OF 2000

- Women fetch about 75% of their household's daily water
- The average student to teacher ratio in project sites is 44:1
- Men and women have fairly equal access to resources but men by and far have more control over those resources
- Almost 100% of women in rural areas are involved in the agricultural sector though this is mostly work on done on the family farm and thus no income is recorded
- The average Nepalese women spends 17 hours of her day engaged in work whereas men spend only 14 hours a day
- Most rural Nepalese families cannot grow enough food to feed their families year-round
- Most rural Nepalese defecate in rivers, streams and open fields because they cannot afford to build a latrine

Figure 3
Female maintenance caretaker
fixing a pump at a Gender and
Poverty project site



themselves to become self-sufficient in the running of their own water programme, including control of construction work and collection of water tariff payments. In this process, NEWAH trains community health workers to educate the population about the importance of cleanliness, proper hygiene practices, and disease prevention and treatment.

While NEWAH's programmes have generally been successful, the lack of involvement of women and the poor concerned NEWAH, especially as the world began to focus more attention on marginalised groups. In 1999, NEWAH created its Gender and Poverty (GAP) Division to examine all related issues both organisationally and within its programmes. NEWAH dubbed this the GAP Approach and set out to make change immediately, starting first with its own headquarters staff.

NEWAH'S GENDER AND POVERTY PERSPECTIVE

NEWAH first hired a gender consultant in 1999 and organised subsequent gender and poverty workshops for its employees. In these workshops, NEWAH employees explored the meanings of gender and poverty, how it affected them personally and profes-

sionally, and what could be done to make NEWAH a gender- and poverty-sensitive organisation. These workshops had a positive effect on the participants despite some disagreements and misunderstandings related to gender and poverty. Some of the more important outcomes of these workshops were the goals and objectives NEWAH created in order to determine the success of its GAP Approach (Table 3). NEWAH staff also collaborated and created a five-year Log-Frame, which provides a detailed outline of NEWAH's undertakings for GAP. Lastly, the NEWAH GAP team worked together to create monitoring and evaluation forms that will be used to collect data on the effects of GAP in the community. The GAP team, after having participated in these workshops, trained their fellow employees in the GAP ideology. With the aid of all GAP members, the senior management team then set out to change and remake the organisation's internal workings by changing employee policy and encouraging the hiring of women and low-income/low-caste persons. NEWAH strongly believes that the changes it expects others to make must first start from within the organisation.

Once NEWAH had successfully begun to address gender and poverty on an organisational level, it began to focus on its work in the field to determine how to incorporate gender and poverty. The GAP headquarter team, along with the five Regional GAP teams, decided it would be best to test GAP pilot projects after their conceptualisation and before implementation into all NEWAH water projects. This would give NEWAH the opportunity to monitor, evaluate and make changes to the GAP process in order to ensure positive outcomes.

NEWAH currently has five GAP pilot projects underway. These GAP projects follow the general order of regular NEWAH projects (as described above) with a few very important changes. At the start of each GAP project, NEWAH provides gender and poverty training to its partner organisations, water users committees, as well as to the entire community. This participation is not forced, but NEWAH goes to extensive lengths to plan meetings in accordance with the availability of all community members, women and poor included. Part of NEWAH's GAP Approach is to include women and poor in the decision-making process and in manual labour

TABLE 3.
GOALS AND OBJECTIVES OF NEWAH*

- Men and women accept NEWAH's principles, policies and working procedures
- Gender awareness training visibly increases task-sharing among men and women
- Fair and equal representation of women in decision-making positions
- Equal representation of men and women from all caste/ethnic groups
- Fair and equal representation of women in technical training
- All community members receive health education, and improvements in health become visible
- Regular maintenance funds collected
- Ensure the availability of latrine construction facilities in the community to those who qualify for NEWAH's subsidies

* Data gathered from NEWAH GAP workshop in the spring of 2000.

activities, particularly those that are paid jobs. Therefore, NEWAH encourages community members to select women and the poor to serve on the community water users committees and to work as Health Motivators, Sanitation Workers, and Maintenance Caretakers. To help alleviate poverty, NEWAH also created subsidies so that the poor can equally benefit from the water project.

SUCCESS OF GAP

To date, NEWAH's GAP Approach has proven successful both internally and externally. The organisation's policies have changed to provide equal leave for men and women, including maternity and paternity leave. The general attitude among NEWAH staff has changed dramatically around issues involving gender and poverty. The idea of including women and the poor in development is not limited to NEWAH's GAP projects. It has also carried over into the thinking and process of NEWAH's other work.

In NEWAH's five GAP programmes, though the work is still underway, success is evident. Those communities where GAP has been implemented showed little resistance to NEWAH's Gender and Poverty Approach, and in many cases, embraced the idea of equal participation and decision-making by all. These communities, have included women on their water users committees, with many holding status positions and actively participating in decision-making. Women and low-income members of the communities have also participated in health training, and in performing much of the physical labour involved in the projects. Communities, partner organisations and NEWAH seem pleased with the outcomes of GAP thus far and success shines bright over the future of NEWAH's GAP Approach.

THE FUTURE OF GAP

After completion of these five GAP projects, NEWAH will monitor and evaluate the outcomes over the next two years to determine sustainability. During this time the GAP Approach will be refined and improved. If all goes well, the GAP Approach will eventually be incorporated into all of NEWAH's water projects. NEWAH hopes to share its process and findings with other non-governmental and governmental organisations in Nepal in order to emphasise the importance of incorporating gender and poverty into development work.

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Kelly Corley has worked as a gender and poverty specialist with Nepal Water for Health in Kathmandu, Nepal. She received her Master of Social Work degree from Washington University in St. Louis with a focus on social and economic development. Her work has included social and environmental research, organisation and development in the United States and Nepal. Ms. Corley currently resides in Chicago, Illinois.

Raju Kadka works at Nepal Water for Health Organisation in Kathmandu, Nepal. He is the coordinator of NEWAH's Communication Section. As such, he is also responsible for coordination of the implementation of the Gender and Poverty sensitive community management approach. NEWAH is a non-governmental, non-political and not-for-profit organisation working throughout Nepal to assist local organisations in the implementation of clean, safe drinking water, hygiene education and sanitation.

IF YOU HAVE ANY ENQUIRIES REGARDING THE CONTENT OF THIS ARTICLE, PLEASE CONTACT:

Raju Kadka
Communication Section, Gender and Poverty
Coordinator
Nepal Water for Health
P.O. Box 4231
Baluwatar
Kathmandu
Nepal

Tel: +977 1 418 248

Fax: +977 1 414 099

E-mail: tarnewah@mos.com.np