

Annex 1: NEPAL – An Overview

The Kingdom of Nepal is a small landlocked country bounded by the two most populous countries in the world, India to the east, south, and west, and China to the north, between 26° 22' and 30° 27' N and 80° 4' to 88° 12' E, in the lap of the Himalayas. The country is about 885 km long from east to west with an average width of 193 km from north to south and covers an area of 147,181 sq.km. Nepal encompasses a huge range of elevation from 90 masl in the south to 8,848m in the north, with a wide diversity of climates and terrain, and contains some of the most rugged and difficult mountain terrain in the world.

The country can be divided into five major physiographic regions: the Terai, Churia hills or Siwaliks, middle hills or mid-mountains, high mountains, and high Himalayas, stretching in parallel belts in succession from south to north.

- The **Terai** is a low, flat strip of land some 10 to 50 km wide extending east to west along the Indian border; it forms the northern extension of the Indo-Gangetic Plain. An approximately 15 km wide belt of rich agricultural land stretches along the southern edge, whereas the northern section adjoining the foothills is more marshy. The Terai contains dense forest areas and a number of national parks, wildlife reserves, and conservation areas.
- The forested **Churia** foothills (or Siwalik range) rise from the Terai plain to the rugged Mahabharat Range. The Churia Range is sparsely populated and rises in almost perpendicular escarpments to altitudes of more than 1,200m. The fragile soils and steep slopes make the land unsuitable for cultivation. In some places the hills bifurcate into two parallel ranges, separated by broad basins that are often referred to as the Inner Terai or Dun Valleys. Unlike the Churia hills themselves, the population of these valleys has increased markedly in the last few decades.
- The **middle hills** or **mid-mountain** region is an area of more gentle slopes at elevations of 1,000 to 2,000 masl lying between the Siwaliks and the high mountains and dominated by the Mahabharat range which borders the Siwaliks. A significant portion of this area is cultivated under intricate and extensive terrace systems and the forests are heavily exploited. Some of the main urban centres are located here, including Kathmandu and Pokhara, which are both located in flat basin-shaped valleys.
- The **high mountains** extend from the middle mountains to the high Himalayas, at altitudes of mostly 2,000 to 4,000m, although lower at the base of some of the deep V-shaped valleys that characterise the region. The region is typified by long steep slopes with heavy forest cover.
- The **High Himalaya** region ranges in elevation from around 4,000 to more than 8,000m and is a spectacular area of rocky ice-covered massifs, rolling snow fields, and glaciers lying between the tree-line and the tops of the Himalayan massifs. It contains many of the world's highest peaks including Everest, Kanchenjunga, Lhotse, Makalu, Cho Oyu, Dhaulagiri, Manaslu, and Annapurna. Apart from the trans-Himalayan valleys to the north, which support human settlements up to elevations of 4,000m and more, this area is uninhabited.

Nepal is rich in water resources and has numerous streams and rivers that flow from the mountains to the plains. Major rivers include the Koshi, Gandaki, Karnali, Mechi, Mahakali, Bagmati, and Rapti. Most of the rivers converge to form four main river systems: the Karnali, Narayani, Gandaki, and Kosi, which traverse the Mahabharat range through deep gorges before passing through the Terai. These rivers have great potential for hydropower development.

The climate is strongly influenced by the elevation and the location in a subtropical latitude. The climate ranges from subtropical in the Terai, through warm temperate in the mid-mountain region, to cool temperate in higher mountain areas between 2,000 and 3,500m, and alpine at altitudes between 3,500 and 5,000m along the lower slopes of the Himalaya mountains. Above 5,000m there is permanent snow and ice. Precipitation varies both seasonally and geographically, with a large part falling during the monsoon season from June to September, and a gradient in rainfall from east to west.

Administratively, Nepal is divided into 75 districts within 14 zones that are grouped together into 5 development regions. The districts are further divided into village development committees (VDC) and municipalities. Currently, there are 3,915 VDCs and 58 municipalities in the country. Each VDC is composed of 9 wards; municipalities may have 9 or more wards, the maximum at present being 35. For socioeconomic purposes, the 75 districts are also identified as 'mountain', 'hill' or 'Terai' districts, according to their approximate location within the high mountains and high Himalayas, the middle mountains, and the

Churia hills and Terai, respectively. These regions contain around 7, 44, and 48% of the population, and 35, 42 and 23% of the total land area of the country, respectively

The capital city of Nepal is Kathmandu, which lies in Kathmandu district in the Bagmati Zone of the Central Development Region. The population (as of 2001) is 23.2 million within 101 recognised caste/ethnic groups. The current estimated rate of population growth is 2.2 percent per annum.

One of Nepal's principal natural resources is its forests, which cover about one-third of the country and provide valuable timber, firewood, medicinal herbs, and other non-timber forest products. The large diversity of climates and terrain supports a vast diversity of plant and wildlife within the country. The economy is still predominantly rural, with subsistence farming playing a major role. Rice is the staple food in most parts of the country, with barley, millet, and potatoes playing an important role at higher elevations.

Nepal is still one of the least developed countries of the world according to the UN classification. Rising population pressure on the land and deterioration of the environment have been recognised as major challenges for sustainable development. Little significant economic growth has been achieved since 1956 despite the implementation of a series of development plans. Factors contributing to this include the landlocked geography, rugged terrain, lack of natural resources, and poor infrastructure. The major environmental problems are land degradation, deforestation, and pollution. Poverty is the root cause of environmental degradation. Land and forest resources are over-exploited because of heavy dependence on the natural resource base, while water and mineral resources are under-utilised owing to lack of financial resources and infrastructure. Soil erosion, fertility decline, sedimentation, and floods have degraded and continue to degrade scarce land resources.

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