

## **Community involvement in managing rivers water in Nepal**

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Perched on the southern slopes of Himalayas, Nepal is socially and ethnically diverse as its flat lands, broad valleys, and the highest mountain peaks in the world. “Top of the World” aptly describes to Nepal, home to eight out of world’s 10 highest mountains, including the 29,030-foot Mt. Everest. Nepal is a landlocked country located between India and China. In its 147,181 square kilometer geography, currently Nepal has 23.15 million population compared to 5.6 million in 1911 (CBS, 2001). Females account for more than 50 percent of total the population; out of them, more than 49 percent are in the reproductive age group (15 yrs. to 45 yrs.) that is equal to 24.6 percent of the total population. It has been documented that 41 percent of population is under the age of 15. About 80 percent of people are dependent on agriculture. A large portion of the people (38 percent) lives below the absolute poverty line (less than 1\$ per day). More than 33 percent of the people are underemployed and this leads to various social and economical difficulties in the country (The World Bank, 2002).

With an annual average precipitation of about 1700 millimeters, Nepal carries a vast water resource potential with a total average annual runoff of more than 220 billions cubic meters of water. The major rivers of Nepal originate in Tibet, traverse through Nepal and join the Ganga river in India before entering the sea. Water is one of the principal natural resources supporting the economy of Nepal, the others being the forestry and tourism sectors, based on the idyllic landscape of the country. At present, almost 30% of Nepal’s agricultural production is based on irrigation facilities. Similarly, 84% of Nepal’s electricity is currently produced by hydroelectric generation. A large increase in hydro power generation capacity would enable Nepal to meet its domestic energy demands as well as increase its revenues by exporting energy to India and neighboring countries. It has been reported that Nepal has more than 6000 rivers with potentiality of producing 43,000 MW electricity.

The present situation with regard to the country’s water resources development can be summarized as follows:

- 33% of the population does not have access to potable water supply.
- Only 42% of the net cultivated land has access to some form of irrigation.
- Only 41% of the irrigated land receives “year-round irrigation”.

- Less than 2% of the country's estimated economically viable potential hydroelectric capacity (43,000 MW) has been developed;
- Around 53% of the population has no toilet or sanitary facilities.

The Water Resources Strategy approved by His Majesty's Government of Nepal has identified ten key strategic outputs for the coming next 5-year, 15-year and 25-year periods in order to maximize sustainable benefits of water use in the country. These relate to disaster management, environment, water supply and sanitation, irrigation, hydropower, other economic activities, water related information systems, policy and legal reforms, international cooperation and institutional mechanisms. The activities and indicators for each output have been identified by the comprehensive strategy document. The ongoing National Water Plan and its accompanying Environment Management Plan will translate the envisaged outputs into program's and action plans. The Water Resources Strategy Formulation - Nepal (2001) has given the directional guidance and priority to address the problems of sustainable water resources development along with poverty reduction for the coming 25 years in order to sustainable enhancement in the living condition of the poor people.

To a large extent, donor and government recognition of the importance of beneficiary participation for development effectiveness and limitations on the capacity of government and public sector executing agencies to promote participation, has contributed to the increasing interest in NGOs. To an even greater extent, NGOs' and civil societies own capacity to influence new approaches to development has dramatically increased in the last decade. NGO leaders themselves have become articulate spokespersons for their grassroots clientele, taking on, in many cases, an advocacy role, where previously they were involved in service delivery. This has occurred as a result of many factors.

### **Involvement of Civil Societies in water Resource Management (WRM)**

The president of the World Bank canceled the Bank's participation in the Arun III Hydroelectric Project in Nepal after the World Bank Inspection Panel declared that the Bank had violated its own policies concerning indigenous people and environmental assessment in approving the project. The Arun III project was the first case brought before the Panel, which began its operations in September 1994. It was Nepal's largest hydropower project, 201 MW with the investment of US \$1.1 billion. There were 44 lending conditionalities making Nepal totally dependent on World Bank for future policy-making and hydropower investment. There were no adequate EIA and mitigation plans, and no money was allocated for the plan and the project was challenged before the Supreme Court on grounds of constitutional right to information which was denied by the project authority. The court gave a verdict in favour of petitioners/activists and its findings challenged the Bank's mishandling of the project. Finally the World Bank unilaterally decided to cancel the project in August 1995

Siwakoti Gopal documented that the positive outcome of the two petitions was unexpected. According to him, both the lawsuit and the complaint before the Inspection Panel had at least three consequences for Nepal. First of all, they increased awareness among those affected by proposed development projects that individuals have the right to information regarding these projects. This will enable activists to safeguard the rights of indigenous persons and protect the environment more effectively in the future. Next, the Supreme Court's decision requiring that the terms of any loan agreement with the World Bank comply with the Nepalese constitution indirectly brings the Bank's activities within the scope of domestic jurisdiction, although the Bank itself remains immune from domestic lawsuits. Finally, the World Bank and the Nepalese government are now undertaking consultations with the local population regarding smaller, cheaper, and better alternatives to the Arun III Project.

This Debate has also led to the formation of local concerned, campaign, consumer and user groups all over the country. Several water and energy user groups, activists and academics have recently formed a Water and 'Energy Users' Federation (WAFED) and adopted the Kathmandu Declaration and Plan of Action for sustainable and environmentally friendly use of water and energy, including the conservation of rivers. Through these forums, they have been able to discuss the importance of their water resources and the potential benefits. They also have been able to influence the decision-making process and project compliance.

### **Partnership for Sustainable Development - Nepal**

The Partnership for Sustainable Development (PSD) Nepal dedicated to the sustainable development and empowerment of the children and youth of Nepal. PSD aims to advocate for the protection of children and youth rights, explore and expand opportunities to grow to their fullest potential and meet their basic needs. Provide support and create opportunities to the poorest communities of Nepal; It has been running volunteer program to raise awareness about water resource and uses of rivers with local community groups. It has been also working towards the formation of a more knowledgeable and responsible civic society and advocate for local governance as well as building the capacity to the rural water resource users groups.

### **Water and Energy Users' Federation-Nepal (WAFED) and its involvement in Water resource management: A Case**

About 100 groups and water/conservation activists from all over Nepal met in Kathmandu on February 12-16, 2001 and discussed all water-related problems, environmental issues and the question of sustainable development in Nepal in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. They also adopted a Kathmandu Declaration on Water and Energy Development, Human Rights and Environment, and a Plan of Action. The Declaration and Plan of Action include need of an inventory and conservation of all lakes in Nepal as one of its main priorities.

WAFED has adopted few lakes and rivers as its pilot project for the campaign and conservation through local participation. Other project includes the conservation of the

Bagmati River system in the highly polluted Kathmandu Valley, and also the hundreds of rivers, and lakes that are the traditional water resources and are on the verge of collapse. Modern development has almost brought Kathmandu valley's seven UNESCO World Heritage Sites into the condition of non-revival unless something is done very urgently. Again the solution is being sought through empowering the local communities.

The Federation has been launching Save the Bagmati River system and the lakes in Kathmandu Valley Campaign from early 2001. The tragedy of Kathmandu Valley in recent years is that it has become over-populated, over-polluted and the traditional water-taps, ponds, and nearby lakes are on the verge of collapse. The holy rivers (e.g. Bagmati, Bishnumati, Manohara, etc.) of Kathmandu Valley are converted to as permanent and natural sewerage and drainage system. The modern development has brought this valley of the great seven UNESCO World Heritage Sites. (Swayambhunath, Baudhanath, Pashupatinath, Kathmandu Durbar Squire, Patan Durbar Squire, Bhaktapur durbar Squire and Changunarayan) almost into the condition of non-revival unless something is done very urgently.

### **Nepal Water Conservation Foundation**

NWCF promotes sustainable development and management of water through knowledge building and disseminating to be used in informed decision making. It undertakes research and promulgates findings through education and advocacy with a specific focus on capacity building of the upcoming generation as well as disadvantaged groups. It has also publishes *Water Nepal*, an interdisciplinary journal on water management

### **Nepal Water for Health**

NEWAH improved quality of life (socio-economic status) of all Nepalese by providing services in safe water, health sanitation and livelihood opportunities and it implements integrated drinking water, health hygiene improvement and sanitation within a gender and poverty framework. Its support has enabled about 7,50,000 people get access to services. It has also involved in the drinking water sector as catalysts and social auditing organization.

### **Conclusion**

It has been accepted that role and importance of civil societies in the development of projects, especially water resource management project are unavoidable. The government and the donors such as the World Bank and Asian Development Bank also have been developing new set of policies and procedures in their financing of projects. In recent years, they have encouraged the local people to directly approach there institutions through their Inspection Panel or Function who claim as the victims of development projects funded by them. They also have developed series of policies and guidelines

relating to information disclosure, public participation and Environmental Impact Assessment. At country level, the government has prepared this year new draft strategies on Water Resource Development and Hydroelectricity. Involvement of civil societies from grassroots to national level needs to be prioritized. Nepal has better and cheaper projects that are managed locally and without adverse lending conditionalities. No donors and governments can implement good projects without human rights and environmental conservation approach to development. There must be harmony of policies and procedures among the donors, investors and borrowing countries. The existing policies, procedures and other laws relating to access to information, public participation and Environmental Impact Assessment, compensation/resettlement and benefit-sharing must be implemented effectively and in a timely manner

### **Key Recommendations**

Following are the key recommendations to upscale the water resource management in Nepal. It has been well understood that the role of NGOs can not be under recognized.

- Nepal's existing water policies are not adequate to address water crisis and poverty issues
- There is a need to reform existing water policies and laws in line with community-based human rights and environmental approach to development
- Communities and affected people must be involved in EIA and implementation of mitigation plans from the beginning
- Proper institutional development and coordination is essential for better monitoring and evaluation at all levels
- For Nepal, small and medium-size hydropower and water projects are considered as the best options on the side of independent experts, civil society and general public
- No poverty can be addressed in water projects without the director involvement of the poor and marginalized communities
- Rainwater and local water harvesting are most reliable and cheaper options for poor and local communities for drinking water and irrigation
- Local resources must be managed with local knowledge and indigenous technology
- There should be a regional policy and framework convention for the management of all Himalayan water resources
- There must be an integrated approach to the management of all forms of natural resources with the involvement of all stakeholders
- In South Asia joint collaborative efforts between and among the co-riparian nations of the region is most essential in undertaking large and meaningful water resources management projects for the benefit of tens of millions of poor people of the region by bringing about a drastic transformation of the respective national economies through the judicious and equitable harnessing of the Himalayan waters.

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