

Making Local Water Planning Gender and Socially Inclusive

Towards Gender Inclusive Water Sector Development

Why gender and social inclusion matters in local water planning?

A crucial natural resource, water plays a multi-faceted role in the lives of rural residents in Nepal. However, climate change threatens to disturb that relationship as variations in temperature, rainfall, and rainfall patterns are affecting water availability. Thus, water scarcity has become an increasingly challenging issue, oftentimes leading to conflict, which leads to excess workloads for everyone. In situations like these, power differentials between men and women as well as different social groups can unduly influence decision-making processes around water.

Gender inequality is a key obstacle in the quest for sustainable development in Nepal and beyond as it disempowers and increases livelihood insecurity – for both women and men. Water-related decisions are important not only to access water, but also to obtain and multiply the gains that come with accessing water, which are often in the hands of local elite, particularly elite men. In the changing demography of Nepal, most water responsibilities are in women's hands due to male migration for off-farm employment. For these reasons, water planning calls for gender and social inclusiveness.

Water-related programs or policies have implications for gender and social equality and empowerment of women, the poor, and disadvantaged groups as these groups are frequently excluded from meaningful participation in decision-making processes. Their needs and concerns are seldom taken into account in the development of water resource management programs. The need for gender and social inclusive water planning is crucial to ensure the basic human right of individuals to access drinking water, and the equitable benefits of productive water use for farming.

Village water use master plan in Nepal

Water User Master Plans (WUMP) are developed by Village Development Committees (VDCs), and have been in practice in Nepal since the late 1990s when HELVETAS Swiss Intercooperation began supporting these efforts.

WUMP is a participatory process gaining favor around the world. The Nepali government has issued National Guidelines on the Preparation of Water Use Master Plans. Through 2016, more than 200 WUMPs have been prepared in Nepal. To evaluate the effectiveness of WUMPs, ICIMOD and HELVETAS conducted a comprehensive study of the WUMP process using a Gender Equality and Social Inclusion (GESI) perspective. GESI is an approach that works to ensure equity and justice in water access, water use, livelihood improvements, and capacity strengthening of women and marginalised communities. Using GESI to evaluate

Highlights

- WUMP practices have promoted gender and social inclusion in resource identification, planning, and prioritization of water programs.
- Achieving gender and social inclusion in water planning is about crossing existing gender and social barriers to achieve equitable participation in all activities.
- Conceptualizing gender and social inclusion as context and vision in WUMP practices can help to integrate Gender Equity and Social Inclusion concerns effectively.

WUMPs helped the study team to learn how WUMP practices have been successful in promoting gender and social inclusiveness, and what barriers are yet to be overcome.

Promotion of gender and social inclusion in WUMP

Guided by the principle to ensure water access to the poor and marginalized, WUMP Preparation Guidelines adopt affirmative action plans to ensure minimum participation of women and excluded community members at the ward and village levels. Water-related capacity building trainings also take affirmative steps to ensure women's participation and to teach them non-conventional skills. These changes have resulted in a number of positive outcomes:

- an increase in women's involvement (in number as well as voice) in assessing and mapping available water resources,
- an increase in women's roles and participation in prioritizing the water programs in plan documents, both at ward and VDC levels,
- increased women's visibility in various committees, and
- an increased level of confidence and self-esteem along with skills, as expressed by women themselves.

All these changes are expected to contribute to addressing women's needs and interests in future water plans and programs.

Finding more inclusive modes of water planning that encourage community consultations have opened up space to debate gender discriminatory practices such as *chhaupadi*¹ in Western Nepal. For example, during the social mobilization process, the implementing agency use the opportunity to tell people about the negative impacts of *chhaupadi*. This work has contributed to a 90% reduction in the practice in Bajhang, Doti, and Achham districts.

A woman at Koiralakot VDC, Bajhang – "Now we don't have to spend hours for fetching water"

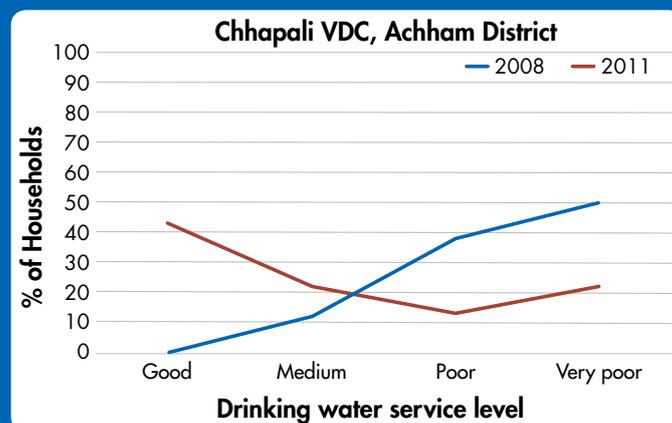
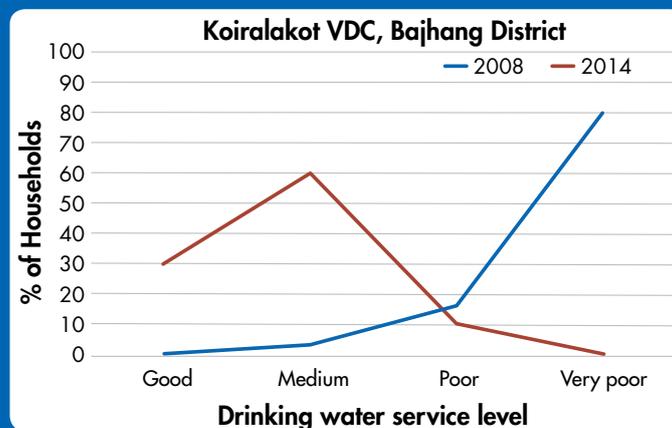


Comparative data from two villages (Koiralakot and Chhapali) in western Nepal also show initial success to improve water supply services through WUMP practices. Graphs below show that in 2014 the number of households experiencing water hardships has greatly reduced compared to 2008. This data demonstrates that families without adequate access to water in these respective communities now have improved access to water services for their daily needs.

Critical issues impeding gender and social inclusion in local water planning

Barriers for effective participation: WUMP preparation processes use a variety of participatory activities, such as social resource mapping, to gather data and inform stakeholders. However, it remains a serious a challenge to make women equal partners in these exercises, mainly due to socio-cultural norms. Despite the Nepali government's recent mandate for women's representation in legislative bodies, pre-existing discrimination toward women in local sites can often discourage meaningful women's participation.

Status of increased service of drinking water supply in Koiralakot and Chhapali VDCs between 2008 and 2014



¹ *Chhaupadi* is a discriminatory traditional practice in Western Nepal that prohibits a woman from participating in normal activities during menstruation. Women during menstruation are isolated from the family, oftentimes confined to an animal shed.

Furthermore, as women carry the lion's share of domestic responsibility, they often have less time to participate in water planning activities.

Statutory loopholes: Though several layers of national-level water guidelines and policies exist in legislation, only few of them explicitly recognize gender inclusiveness of WUMPs. Most of the water-related policy documents are limited to measures for achieving minimum women's participation rather than active engagement of women in water planning. The Local Self Governance Act of 1999 that guides VDC-level policymaking adopts a welfare approach toward women and the poor instead of advocating for measures that would give these groups a more significant role in making decisions about water sharing and management.

Disconnect between conceptualization and implementation: WUMP adopts Integrated Water Resources Management (IWRM) as its guiding principle, which is symbolized by the IWRM Chair. The four legs of the chair represent irrigation, the environment, drinking water, sanitation and hygiene (also called WASH), and other uses such as hydropower. The back of the chair symbolizes various support activities for IWRM including the integration of gender and social inclusion into water planning programs.

Box 1: Positive Steps

WUMP guidelines 2073 BS (2016 AD) recently formulated by the Ministry of Water Supply and Sanitation and the Ministry of Federal Affairs and Local Development include gestures toward improved gender and social inclusion:

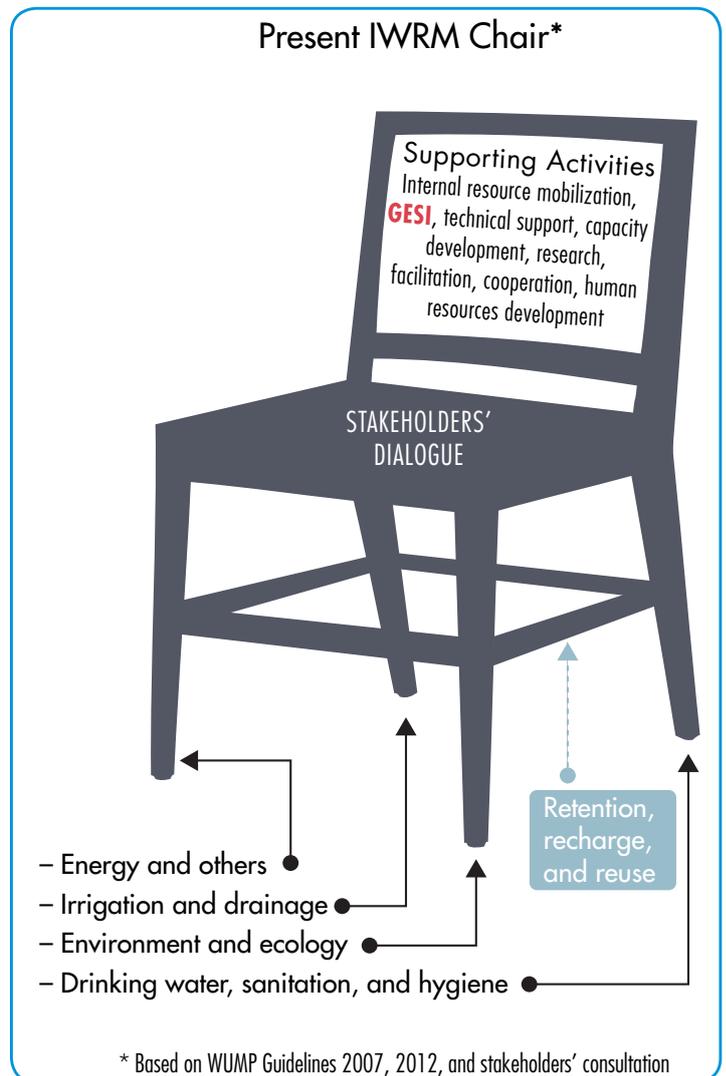
- The vision and objective of WUMP preparation is linked to discourses on social justice and equitable access to water for women and disadvantaged groups.
- There is emphasis on participatory and transparent planning with meaningful participation of key stakeholders at local and district levels.
- Ownership of WUMP processes by local bodies is endorsed.
- The guidelines stipulate for gender sensitive indicators in designing water plans, including the need for a gender-balanced decision-making team.





WUMP attempts to be gender inclusive, but gender integration in WUMPs is not present as a vision or goal, but rather as a support activity. Though the thrust of WUMP is equitable sharing through participatory approaches, WUMP preparation guidelines frame the objectives with a focus on operation (e.g., document planning). As a result, the guidelines do not convey a clear message that WUMP processes should aspire to gender and social inclusion in its vision and objectives so that gender and social inclusion are integrated at every step of the planning process. This gap between GESI and WUMP processes is also reflected in capacity building training: only one session focuses on gender and social inclusion and the linkage of these concepts to the technical sessions is limited.

Issues of ownership: Although local authorities are supposed to assume the central role in WUMP formulation and implementation, in reality, ownership of WUMP is mixed. Some VDCs have used WUMP to inform their annual and periodical plans, while others are beset by challenges such as the frequent absence of elected local representatives, the recurring transfer of VDC secretaries, and a high dependency of VDCs on donors for WUMP implementation support. This uncertain leadership and absence of ownership and support hampers achievement of GESI objectives.



Limited use of gender disaggregated data and analysis:

Though WUMP guidelines stipulate for collecting gender disaggregated data such as occupational mapping of men and women, gender disaggregated analysis of the data is not reflected in WUMP implementation plans. There is a need to revise formats on data collection in this regard as well as the use of gender analysis in implementation plans and priorities.

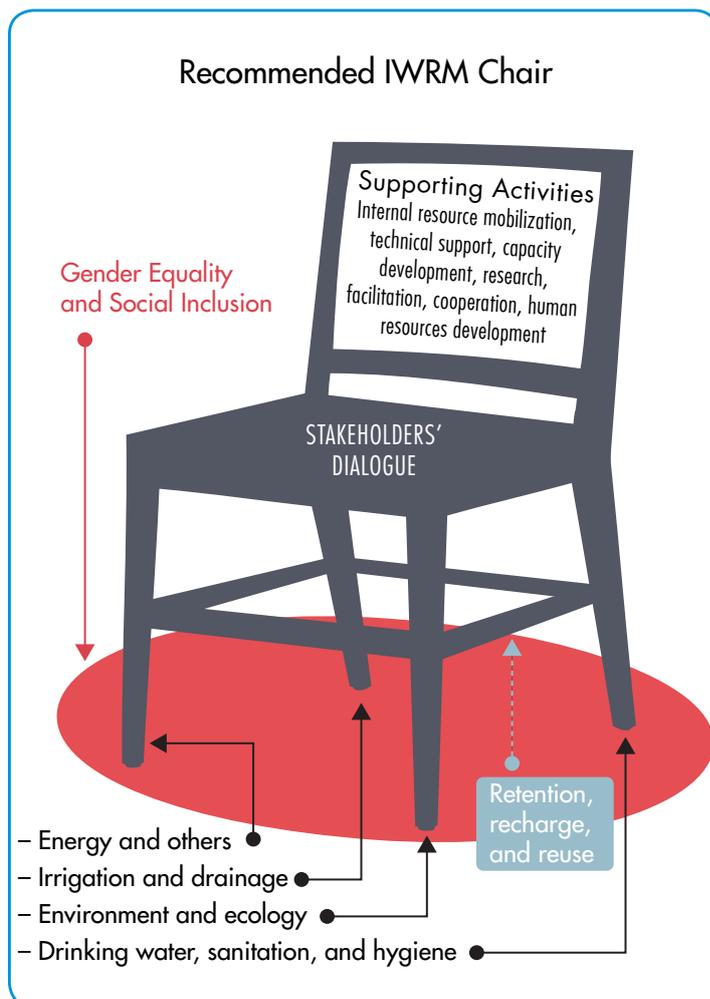
Policy Recommendations

GESI mainstreaming is essential at each and every stage of WUMP planning and implementation. However, the value of and means for making local water planning gender and socially inclusive are not being sufficiently addressed in the public policy arena. Our study on WUMPs in Nepal outlines some policy recommendations for making the local water planning more gender and socially inclusive with an aspiration to more effective and sustainable water resource management in Nepal.

Recognize local water planning practice in water and local governance policy: Currently, Nepal is undergoing state restructuring toward a federal system as mandated in 2015 Nepal Constitution. This would be an appropriate time to make GESI objectives more visible in water planning programs in Nepal. While some ministries (cited above) are sensitive to the needs for improved gender and social inclusion in state and village planning measures, recognition of these principles from the Ministries of Irrigation, Energy, and the Environment would be very important to the success of WUMP processes by addressing the current constraints on women's participation and full engagement.

Re-conceptualize GESI in local water planning processes: As noted above, GESI is typically treated as an activity rather than a vision or objective. This interpretation treats gender in terms of numerical representation and overlooks the differential experiences of women from men. Hence, GESI needs to be conceptualized as context and vision at every implementation stage of WUMP if inclusive development is to be achieved.

Gender disaggregated data, analysis and use: Although gender disaggregated data for many aspects of WUMP have been collected, some key parameters are overlooked, such as service level improvement needs. This work could be undertaken by the VDCs and support organisations. Analysis of this data is also



limited. Rigorous analysis of these data, including that of annual occupation data, will yield greater effectiveness in gender integration.

Clear and relevant capacity building trainings: For improved gender integration in WUMPs, capacity development trainings are needed, particularly with a focus on two aspects:

- To enhance the capacity of VDCs to take ownership of WUMPs. Currently ownership varies among VDCs. In our study, many VDC members said they found it difficult to do gender budgeting as they were not aware what that exercise entails.
- To enhance the skills and capacity of stakeholders to integrate GESI in the WUMP process. Today, gender is treated as a separate topic, apart from other modules dedicated to the individual steps of WUMP training. We suggest that gender needs to be incorporated in each of the modules rather than discussed in isolation from the planning process.

Further Reading

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About the study

Since 2014, ICIMOD and HELVETAS Swiss Inter-cooperation have initiated collaborative action research on Water Use Master Plans (WUMPs). Together they undertook pilot research project aiming to improve understanding of water issues and the need for participatory and inclusive water use planning at the local level. In 2015, ICIMOD commissioned a study entitled, "Review the Processes of Water Use Master Plan from Gender Equality and Social Inclusion Perspective" to make WUMP more GESI responsive. The study was carried out in the village development committees where WUMP preparation was supported by HELVETAS Swiss Inter-cooperation and Rural Village Water Resources Management Project. The study focused on how GESI is mainstreamed in WUMP formulation and implementation processes. It is hoped the findings of the study will constitute an important source of information for evidence-based policy advocacy to promote gender equality and social inclusion in integrated water resource management.

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This study designed and implemented by ICIMOD's Koshi Basin Programme contributes to the Sustainable Development Investment Portfolio supported by Australian aid programme.

ICIMOD would like to acknowledge the support of HELVETAS in conducting this research and producing this report.

ICIMOD gratefully acknowledges the support of its core donors: the Governments of Afghanistan, Australia, Austria, Bangladesh, Bhutan, China, India, Myanmar, Nepal, Norway, Pakistan, Sweden, and Switzerland.

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