

WEFE Nexus Leadership Program – Community of Practice Experience Sharing Event

Lalitpur, Nepal | July 17, 2025

Nisha Onta, Pratisha Joshi and Sanju Koirala

December 2025



Authors

Nisha Onta, Governance Lab, Lalitpur, Nepal

Pratisha Joshi, Governance Lab, Lalitpur, Nepal

Sanju Koirala, International Water Management Institute (IWMI), Kathmandu, Nepal

Acknowledgments

This work was carried out under the CGIAR Policy Innovations Program. We would like to thank all funders who supported this research through their contributions to the CGIAR Trust Fund (www.cgiar.org/funders).

Citation

Onta, N.; Joshi, P.; Koirala, S. 2025. *WEFE Nexus Leadership Program – Community of Practice Experience Sharing Event*. Report of the WEFE Nexus Leadership Program – Community of Practice Experience Sharing Event, Lalitpur, Nepal, 17 July 2025. Colombo, Sri Lanka: International Water Management Institute (IWMI). CGIAR Policy Innovations Program. 15p.

© 2025 International Water Management Institute. Some rights reserved. This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (CC BY 4.0).

Cover photo: Rashmi Pandey

Disclaimer

This publication has been prepared as an output of the CGIAR Policy Innovations Program and has not been independently peer-reviewed. Responsibility for editing, proofreading, and layout, opinions expressed, and any possible errors lies with the authors and not the institutions involved.

Contents

Background	1
Participation Overview	3
Event Progression	4
Presentation: Updates on WEFE Nexus Work	4
Key Messages from the Reflection of Participants	7
1. Strengthening Local-Level Ownership and Federal-Local Coordination	7
2. WEFE Nexus in Policy, Planning, and Budgeting	7
3. Integrating WEFE into Education and Research	7
4. Systems Thinking and Capacity Building	8
5. Political Commitment and Institutional Anchoring	8
6. Gender and Social Inclusion in the WEFE Nexus	8
Recommendations for Actionable Next Steps:	8
Conclusion	9
Annex 1: Community of Practice Meeting Agenda	11
Annex 2: List of Participants	12
Annex 3: List of Phone Respondents:	13

Background

In recent years, Nepal has increasingly felt the weight of intertwined crises in water, food, energy, and the environment, now recognized globally as some of the most pressing risks to socio-economic stability. These challenges are no longer abstract projections; they are manifested in intensely local and painful ways.

A stark example unfolded recently in 2025 with the Madhesh drought (The Rising Nepal, 2025), where the region was officially declared a disaster-affected zone. Groundwater sources dried up, triggering severe drinking water shortages. Agricultural activities were heavily disrupted, with paddy plantation coverage falling to just 46% of arable land. For many farmers, the erratic monsoon dealt a heartbreaking blow, undermining their months of hard labor (Dhakal, 2025). The experience not only exposed the vulnerabilities of our farming communities but also reflected early warnings of climate change-induced water stress and long-term food insecurity.

This crisis echoes findings from a 2019 study by IWMI, which warned that water scarcity could severely undermine agricultural productivity, particularly in rural, agrarian regions, threatening both local livelihoods and national food security.

These cascading impacts highlight what experts and communities alike are increasingly realizing: water, energy, food, and ecosystems are deeply interdependent. Yet, the tendency to approach these sectors in isolation has led to fragmented governance and missed opportunities for resilience. This was further emphasized by a 2022 scoping study under the NEXUS Gains Initiative, which found that the concept and application of the WEFE Nexus remain poorly understood, especially at the local level where coordination is often weakest (Buchy et al., 2022).

Looking at this through a gender lens, the same study found that women professionals working within WEFE sectors face unique and persistent barriers, including underrepresentation in strategic roles and limited access to influence. While their numbers are growing, many continue to feel sidelined within institutions, particularly within government. Building capacity and inclusion across these intersections is not just necessary, it's urgent (ibid).

Recognizing this, with the support of IWMI and Alliance for Bioversity, Governance Lab, in partnership with GREAT International, launched a leadership development program in 2023 targeting mid-career professionals working across WEFE sectors. Of the 22 participants trained over six months, 17 were women. The program combined intensive training with a structured mentor-mentee approach, cultivating a group of dedicated professionals now referred to as WEFE Champions (Buchy et al., 2024).

These Champions have since carried forward the initiative through knowledge-sharing sessions, localized workshops, and peer-led discussions throughout 2024. These efforts reached not only professionals in their respective sectors, but also academic institutions, local governments, and community organizations, spreading awareness of GESI-responsive WEFE planning. Across these events, a recurring theme emerged: the urgent need to break sectoral silos and adopt integrated, intersectional approaches to development and resilience planning.

Building on this momentum, the CGIAR Science Program on Policy Innovation aims to deepen engagement and collaboration among its Champions through continued exchange, reflection, and strategy-building. As part of this ongoing journey, a Community of Practice (CoP) Meet-up was held on Thursday, July 17, 2025, at the IWMI Nepal Office, Lalitpur. This gathering provided an opportunity to reconnect, reflect on progress, and chart a collective path forward.

Objectives of the CoP

- Share updates on ongoing WEFE interventions across sectors
- Learn from the experiences of CoP members and explore synergies
- Discuss strategies to sustain and scale WEFE efforts through stronger collaboration

Participation Overview

The event brought together 10 dynamic WEFE champions from across industries, including government institutions, academia, civil society, and the private sector, highlighting the interdisciplinary nature of the WEFE Nexus. Representatives from IWMI and Governance Lab were present, alongside the WEFE Champions who have been driving change from within their institutions and communities.

Event Progression

The CoP meeting started with a formal welcome from Dr. Nisha Onta, Founder & Executive Director of Governance Lab, who reiterated the spirit and purpose behind convening the session. Reflecting on the journey so far, which started with training a diverse group of mid-career professionals, conducting multi-level workshops, and integrating GESI-responsive WEFE Nexus approaches into local planning processes, she emphasized that the initiative had reached a pivotal moment.

Dr. Onta urged the Champions to use this space to reflect on their learning experiences, share insights from dissemination efforts, and continue nurturing the collective culture of “learning, applying, and sharing.” She focused on the importance of sustaining momentum, especially as the initiative transitions into a new phase, and encouraged participants to explore how they could assume stronger leadership roles within their respective professions and institutions. The need to implement more impactful and resource-efficient interventions was a recurring theme in her opening remarks.



WEFE Nexus Workshop. Photo Credit: Sanju Koirala

Presentation: Updates on WEFE Nexus Work

Following the introduction, Dr. Santosh Nepal, Water Resources and Climate Change Researcher at IWMI, delivered a comprehensive presentation on ongoing WEFE-related efforts, with a specific focus on the localization of WEFE Nexus capacity-strengthening programs. His talk also explored the broader institutional and governance challenges in implementing the Nexus approach in Nepal.

Key Highlights from the Presentation:

- **Upstream–Downstream Needs and Water Management Crises:** Emphasized the mismatched water demands between upstream and downstream communities, contributing to resource scarcity and governance tensions.
- **Water, Food Security, and Nutrition Interlinkages:** Addressed how poor water management directly affects food and nutritional outcomes, particularly in climate-vulnerable regions.
- **National Water Security Outlook:** Cited the Asian Water Development Outlook 2020, highlighting Nepal's low performance in water security indicators and the urgent need for integrated resource management.
- **Sectoral Demands and Policy Misalignments:** Outlined how competing demands from different sectors, temporal mismatches in water availability, and weak coordination exacerbate resource stress.
- **Context-Specific Nexus Application:** Argued for the need to define and apply the WEFN Nexus framework contextually, tailored to Nepal's federal system and grounded in science-policy-practice integration.
- **WEFN as a Dynamic and Climate-Stressed System:** Explained how socio-economic shifts and climate change continuously reshape Nexus dynamics, demanding flexible, cross-sectoral responses.
- **Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA) as a Nexus Tool:** Shared how EIA is evolving into an Integrated Impact Assessment tool, incorporating environmental, biodiversity, social, cultural, and economic dimensions, with strong inter-sectoral coordination.
- **Nexus in Action – Case Example:** Cited the Andhi Khola Hydropower and Irrigation Project (9.4 MW) as a practical example of WEFN in action, where a single intervention supported hydropower generation, job creation, and irrigation for nearly 599 hectares of land.
- **Climate Change Policy (2019):** Showcased the policy's framework addressing nine thematic and five inter-thematic areas and its potential for enabling inter-sectoral synergy under Nepal's national adaptation priorities (NAP, NDC).
- **Data Gaps and the Need for Evidence-Based Planning:** Highlighted significant inconsistencies in agriculture and irrigation data. Emphasized the need for reliable, GIS-based tools to ensure accurate planning and avoid the "approximation culture" that weakens development outcomes.
- **Unpacking the Nexus: The 'Unpuzzling' Process:** Advocated for breaking down WEFN into its functional components: resources, tools, enabling environment, and governance mechanisms—and understanding how they can be aligned through CoP platforms like this one.

- **Nexus Across Political Boundaries and Scales:** Discussed how the WEFÉ Nexus approach must operate across governance levels: federal, provincial, and local, while fostering dialogue between science, policy, and practice communities.
- **Climate and Cross-Sectoral Impact:** Reinforced that climate change is both a driver and amplifier of WEFÉ-related stresses, and therefore, solutions must be cross-cutting in design and implementation.
- **Integrated Data and Methodologies:** Called for harmonized data systems, especially in light of inconsistencies due to differing census models and methodologies, arguing for a strong foundation of verified data to inform policy.
- **CoP as Part of the Enabling Environment:** Positioned the Community of Practice not just as a platform for sharing but as a key component in building the enabling environment for Nexus implementation.

Afterwards, Dr. Sanju Koirala, Social Science-Water and Natural Resources Researcher at IWMI, provided a comprehensive overview of ongoing WEFÉ capacity-building efforts at federal, provincial, and local government levels, drawing on IWMI's ongoing work within the CGIAR Science Program on Policy Innovation and Oxfam's TROSA project focusing on the governance landscape.

Key Reflections from the Presentation:

- Tiered Capacity Building:

- **Federal level:** Focused on WEFÉ leadership development and high-level sensitization.
- **Provincial level:** Conducted workshops emphasizing the integration of GESI within the WEFÉ Nexus.
- **Local level:** Delivered GESI-WEFÉ Nexus training, notably in the Ragon Watershed, showcasing localized application.

- **Progress Since January 12 Initiative:** Dr. Koirala recapped milestones, including a foundational scoping study and capacity-building activities across all three tiers of government. She shared case studies demonstrating how organic collaboration is emerging among municipalities, particularly those facing resource and governance challenges akin to those at the federal level. These examples reflected a growing appetite for interlinking WEFÉ principles with local realities.

- **Institutional Engagement & Post-Training Sustainability:** Dr. Koirala emphasized that without post-training support, early learning often dissipates over time. Sustained technical and institutional reinforcement is crucial. Municipal representatives themselves had expressed a strong demand to extend similar training opportunities to broader teams, not just to selected members.

- **Strategic Recommendations:** Execution at the local level must be underpinned by federal cooperation, and distinct strategies should be designed for federal, provincial, and regional implementation to align capacities and mandates effectively. She even encouraged the participants to take the lead in consistently sharing the WEFÉ approach with colleagues. This

approach helps mitigate disruptions caused by high turnover in executive positions and continuously reinvigorates institutional memory around the WEFÉ Nexus.

Key Messages from the Reflection of Participants

Then, the event shifted to the participants, their insights, experiences, and reflections. Participants' sharing during the CoP meet-up brought forth a variety of perspectives, concerns, and solutions based on their practical experiences. While diverse in focus, several thematic threads emerged that speak to the evolving opportunities and challenges in advancing the WEFÉ Nexus in Nepal.

1. Strengthening Local-Level Ownership and Federal-Local Coordination

- **Leverage Local Power for Implementation:** Participants highlighted that empowering local governments, where participatory planning is often more feasible. This could be an essential step in effectively implementing WEFÉ strategies.

- **Need for Multi-Tiered Strategies:** Given that policy direction and governance structures are set at the federal level, it is crucial to develop differentiated strategies tailored to federal, provincial, and local realities.

- **Institutionalizing Coordination:** Regular engagement mechanisms, such as a bi-monthly multi-stakeholder meeting among the WEFÉ Champions, as well as involving secretaries, researchers, and political leaders, were recommended to strengthen synchronization across political and executive levels.

2. WEFÉ Nexus in Policy, Planning, and Budgeting

- **Budget Availability vs. Planning Gap:** At the provincial level, participants noted that while budget provisions may exist, the lack of planning tools and institutional clarity often delays or obstructs implementation.

- **Mainstreaming into Planning Cycles:** Without formal policies, guidelines, or procedures referencing the WEFÉ Nexus, many line ministries and implementing agencies lack the direction or mandate to apply it.

- **Combating the 'Donor Agenda' Perception:** WEFÉ-related concepts might sometimes be met with skepticism at the local level, where they may be perceived as donor-driven. Clear communication and local adaptation are essential to overcoming this.

3. Integrating WEFÉ into Education and Research

- **Curriculum Integration at Multiple Levels:** The inclusion of WEFÉ in postgraduate coursework has already led to new research opportunities. Expanding this into undergraduate programs, particularly in disciplines like Sociology and Crisis Management, could build broader foundational knowledge.

- **Generating Local Knowledge:** Embedding WEFÉ in academic research agendas can generate evidence and strengthen context-specific understanding, especially among early-career scholars.

4. Systems Thinking and Capacity Building

- **Breaking the ‘Siloed Mindset’:** Many participants noted that Nepal’s education and governance systems have conditioned professionals to operate in sectoral silos. Moving toward systems thinking is essential for effective WEFE implementation.

- **Simplifying Frameworks for Adoption:** For WEFE to be embraced across institutions and professions, participants called for user-friendly, adaptable frameworks that can be scaled from small initiatives to broader systems.

5. Political Commitment and Institutional Anchoring

- **WEFE as a Political Agenda:** To ensure continuity despite ministerial turnover, participants stressed the need to elevate the WEFE Nexus to the political agenda. This would help institutionalize it and reduce its dependence on individual champions.

- **Avoiding Imported Models:** While global learning is valuable, stakeholders urged the localization of WEFE approaches, ensuring they reflect Nepal’s unique governance, geography, and cultural context.

6. Gender and Social Inclusion in the WEFE Nexus

- **GESI as Central to Nexus Work:** Case stories shared during the session illustrated how gender dynamics shift with changes in food and water systems. Participants reaffirmed that GESI should not be an afterthought but a core design principle in WEFE initiatives.

- **Bridging Nexus and GESI in National Commitments:** With the upcoming NDC 3.0, there is an opportunity to more intentionally align WEFE and GESI perspectives, particularly in sectors like WASH and food systems.

Recommendations for Actionable Next Steps:

i. Organize Regular CoP Dialogues: Establish consistent touchpoints for WEFE Champions along with relevant WEFE stakeholders, be it monthly forums, learning circles, online groups, etc, to exchange updates, refine strategies, and track implementation progress.

ii. Encourage Localized Planning and Budgeting Alignment: Support local-level government, like municipalities, in embedding WEFE Nexus considerations into their annual planning cycles and budgeting processes with technical guidance.

iii. Adopt a Bottom-Up Implementation Approach: Work with NGOs, CBOs, CFUGs, and cooperatives to apply WEFE concepts in local development projects through participatory methods and planning frameworks.

iv. Develop Contextual Toolkits and Guidebooks: Produce easy-to-use WEFE integration tools tailored to Nepal’s federal structure, ecological zones, and community needs, mainly catering in resource-scarce or climate-vulnerable areas.

v. Compile and Disseminate Practical Case Studies: Create a repository of successful WEFE interventions from diverse sectors (forestry, agroecology, energy, journalism, education) to inspire replication and scale.

vi. Integrate Indigenous Knowledge and Local Practices: Ensure WEFE resources and training include indigenous and community-based resource management systems to promote relevance and ownership.

vii. Mainstream WEFE into Journalism and Storytelling: Develop toolkits for journalists to incorporate WEFE narratives into field-based reporting, backed by training and mentorship opportunities.

viii. Offer Research Grants for Youth and Early-Career Professionals: Enable students and young professionals to explore WEFE-related research topics through small grants, supervised field visits, and thematic studies.

ix. Engage in Multi-Level Governance Dialogue: Organize policy roundtables and technical workshops at federal, provincial, and local levels to embed cross-sectoral planning mechanisms and encourage inter-agency collaboration.

x. Address Policy and Institutional Gaps: Advocate to include WEFE Nexus language in sectoral guidelines, climate strategies, and budgeting frameworks. Push for inclusion in training curricula and planning templates at all governance levels.

Conclusion

The event served as a reflective space anchoring the WEFE Nexus within Nepal's evolving development landscape. The conversations emphasized that while the WEFE Nexus is gaining traction in discourse, it must now transition from conceptual appeal to practical, localized implementation.

Participants' reflections illuminated both encouraging progress and persistent barriers, ranging from limited institutional coordination and policy silos to the lack of contextualized frameworks and locally grounded strategies. Yet within these gaps emerged a strong current of possibility. The recognition of local government empowerment, indigenous knowledge, youth engagement, and cross-sectoral leadership points toward a path of transformation.

Notably, the workshop highlighted that advancing the WEFE Nexus is not merely a technical task; it is deeply political, social, and cultural. It demands inclusive planning, iterative learning, and coalition-building across governance levels. The shared commitment of participants to continue as WEFE Champions reflects a growing movement grounded in systems thinking, social justice, and resilience. Hence, the next phase must now focus on turning insights into action, relationships into platforms, and frameworks into practice.

References

Buchy, M.; Shrestha, S.; Shrestha, G. 2022. Scoping study: capacities and needs for strengthening Water-Energy-Food-Environment (WEFE) Nexus approaches in Nepal. Kathmandu, Nepal: International Water Management Institute (IWMI). CGIAR Initiative on NEXUS Gains; Rome, Italy: Alliance of Bioversity International and the International Center for Tropical Agriculture (CIAT). Available at: <https://hdl.handle.net/10568/127201>

Buchy, M.; Koirala, S.; Khadka, M.; Pradhan, M. S.; Onta, N. 2024. Reflections on multi-actor, transdisciplinary leadership training on the water, energy, food, and ecosystems nexus approach for women in Nepal. Colombo, Sri Lanka: International Water Management Institute (IWMI). CGIAR Initiative on NEXUS Gains.

Dhakal, Binod. 2025. Everything You Should Know About the Madhes Drought: Causes, Impact, and Government Response. Available at: [Nepal News | Nepal's First Online News Portal](#)

Koirala, Sanju. 2024. Women defining leadership in water, energy, food, and ecosystems in Nepal. Montpellier, France: CGIAR. CGIAR Initiative on NEXUS Gains. Available at: <https://hdl.handle.net/10568/162776>

The Rising Nepal. 2025. Unprecedented drought disrupts paddy plantation, triggers drinking water shortage in Madhes. Available at: [Unprecedented drought disrupts paddy plantation, triggers drinking water shortage in Madhes](#)

Annex 1: Community of Practice Meeting Agenda

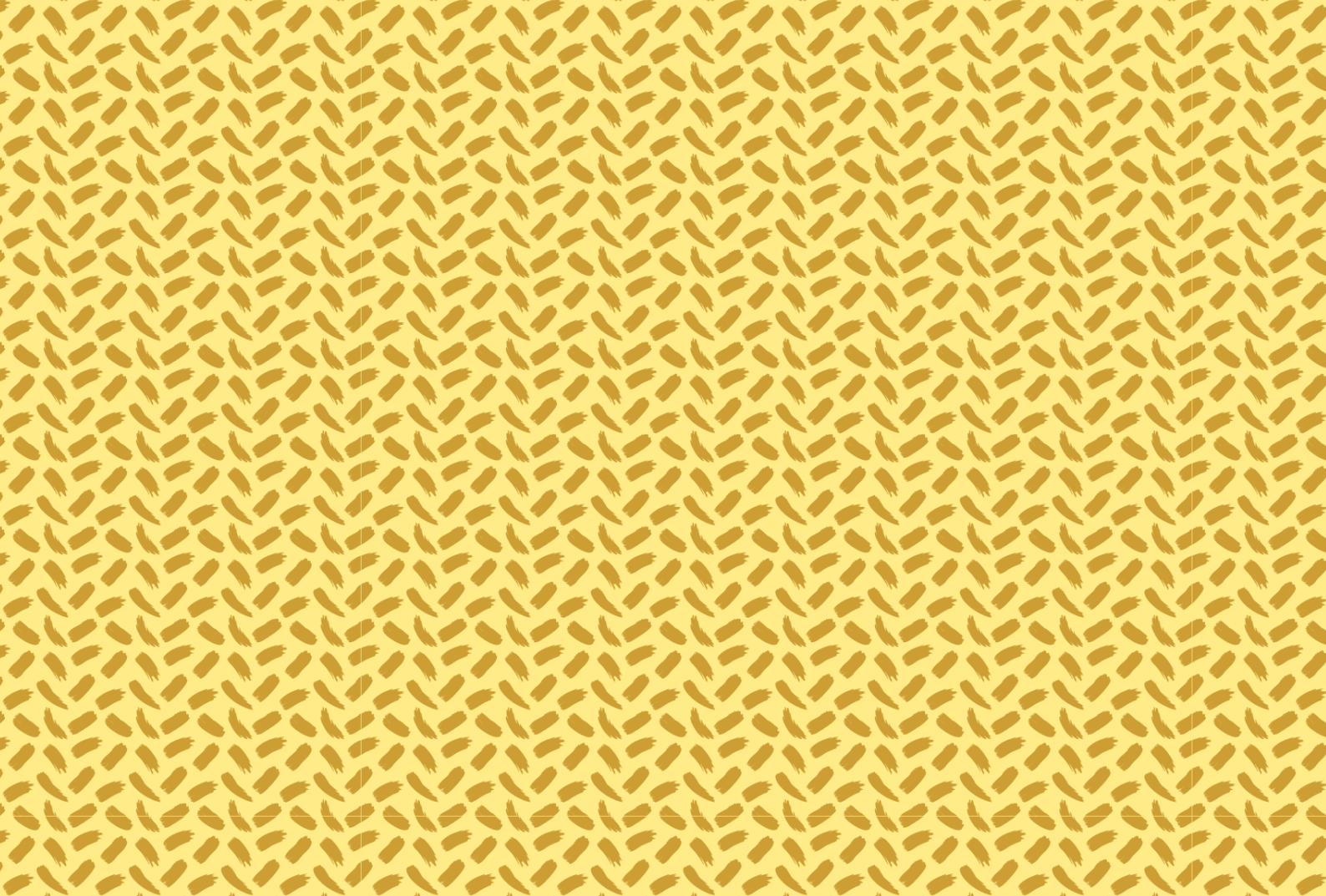
Time	Session	Detail	Responsibility
12:00-1:00 PM	Tea and Cookies		
1:00- 1:15	Welcome	Welcome Remarks from Dr. Manohara Khadka and Dr. Sanju Koirala	Facilitated by Dr. Nisha Onta
1:15-1:30	WEFE update from IWMI	-Update on WEFE Nexus activities IWMI -Update on operationalizing capacity strengthening program in Rangun Watershed	Presented by Santosh Nepal and Dr. Sanju Koirala
1:30- 1:35	WEFE Video		Facilitated by Pratisha Joshi
1:35- 2:15	Feedback from participants		Facilitated by Pratisha
2:15- 2:45	Discussion on the way forward	Conduct a short exercise to discuss way forward	Facilitated by Dr. Nisha Onta
2:45- 3:00	Feedback session and Closing		Facilitated by Dr. Nisha Onta
3:00 pm	Snacks		

Annex 2: List of Participants

S.N	Name	Sex	Designation	Organization
1	Aanandita Shrestha	F	Program and Research Officer	Governance Lab
2	Anjali Sai Chalise	F	School & College Coordinator	Nepalese Youth for Climate Action
3	Jigyasha Rai Yangkhurung	F	Senior Division Engineer	Department of Water Resources and Irrigation (MoEWRI)
4	Leena Sah	F	Associate Professor	Kathmandu Forestry College
5	Nisha Onta	F	GESI & Women Leadership Training Expert	WOCAN/ Governance Lab
6	Pradyumna Raj Pandey	M	Senior Agriculture Economist	Ministry of Agriculture and Livestock Development
7	Pratisha Joshi	F	R&P Consultant	Governance Lab
8	Sangita Shrestha	F	Senior Agriculture Engineer	Ministry of Agriculture and Livestock Development
9	Sanju Koirala	F	National Researcher	IWMI
10	Sovita Pariyar	F	Chairperson	Sarthak Nepal

Annex 3: List of Phone Respondents

S.N	Name	Sex	Designation	Organization
1	Asha Khanal	F	Electrical Engineer	Nepal Electricity Authority
2	Anita Shrestha	F	Board Member	Himawanti
3	Mukesh Pokhrel	M	Chief Editor	Echo Sanchar Network Pvt. Ltd.
4	Palpasa Maharjan	F	Senior Division Engineer	Department of Water Resources and Irrigation (MoEWRI)
5	Suchana Acharya	F	Senior Division Engineer	Department of Water Resources and Irrigation (MoEWRI)



CGIAR is a global research partnership for a food-secure future. CGIAR science is dedicated to transforming food, land, and water systems in a climate crisis. Its research is carried out by 13 CGIAR Centers/Alliances in close collaboration with hundreds of partners, including national and regional research institutes, civil society organizations, academia, development organizations and the private sector. www.cgiar.org

