

Thirsty for change: Water services in Nepal and users' perceptions of the state

Key messages

- Most rural areas of Nepal still do not have clean and safe drinking water facilities. Only 3.5% of the 716 households surveyed by SLRC could access drinking water at home.
- A range of state and non-state actors are involved in supplying water. The different providers lack consistency and in general, respondents were dissatisfied with the amount they are charged.
- In spite of more local involvement, without political influence communities still felt they were less likely to get the budget they needed to secure an efficient water supply.

According to Nepal's Water and Energy Commission Secretariat, more than one in four (28%) Nepalese people do not have access to a basic water supply, while three in four (75%) have no sanitation facilities. The gap in provision between rural and urban areas is large, with urban areas significantly better off. Most rural areas of Nepal still do not have clean and safe drinking water facilities.

Following the ending of Nepal's Maoist insurgency in 2006, the Government of Nepal sought to involve communities more directly in local governance, perhaps mindful that the state's poor performance in delivering basic services had been one of the causes of the decade-long conflict. In the water sector, autonomous bodies such as District Water Resource Committees (DWRCs) and Drinking Water Management Committees (DWMCs) were created at local level to enable greater community participation.

The Nepal Centre for Contemporary Research (NCCR) examined drinking water provision as part of its contribution to the Secure Livelihoods Research Consortium. SLRC is an eight-country, six-year research programme investigating how people in places affected by conflict make a living and access basic services such as education, health, water; social protection; and livelihood services. NCCR's research focussed on Rolpa District, an under-developed area in Nepal's mid-western region and a major flashpoint of the Maoist insurgency. It aimed to assess how changes to local water management had affected people's access to drinking water, and any resultant impact on local people's perceptions of local and central government.

Briefing paper 14

August 2015



Most households depend on public taps for their drinking water - only 3.5% can access it at home

© World Bank

SLRC Briefing Papers present information, analysis and key policy recommendations on issues relating to livelihoods, basic services and social protection in conflict-affected situations. This and other SLRC Briefing Papers are available from www.securelivelihoods.org. Funded by DFID, Irish Aid and EC.

The views presented in this paper are those of the author(s) and not necessarily the views of SLRC, DFID, EC or Irish Aid or UNU. ©SLRC 2015.

Secure Livelihoods Research Consortium

Overseas Development Institute (ODI)
203 Blackfriars Road
London SE1 8NJ
United Kingdom

T +44 (0)20 3817 0031
F +44 (0)20 7922 0399
E slrc@odi.org.uk
www.securelivelihoods.org
@SLRCtweet



Methods

The Nepal study examines people's access to drinking water services in terms of physical, financial, socio-political and administrative factors, based on data from:

- SLRC's 2012 longitudinal survey, conducted by NCCR among 3,175 households in three districts of Nepal, including Rolpa; and
- NCCR's follow-up qualitative study in 2013 in the Liwang and Budagaon Village Development Committees (VDCs) of Rolpa District, comprising in-depth interviews with 52 respondents, broadly split by gender and caste (Acharya et al., 2015).

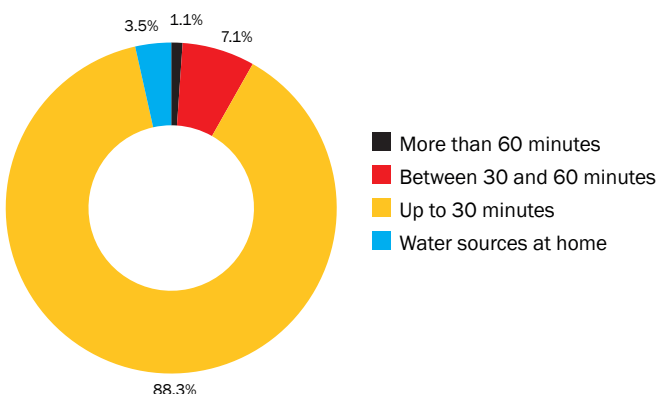
Key findings

1. Water service providers lack consistency

Village Development Committee (VDC) Offices are responsible for drinking water supply, irrigation and river control programmes, preserving water sources and environmental protection in their areas. VDC Offices coordinate with DWRCs, DWMCs and other local water management groups. Local water services are provided not only by the state, but by a wide range of non-state entities such as NGOs, international NGOs and the private sector.

The study found that different providers all have different rules for service distribution. Some do not charge users for providing the service; some charge nominal fees; and some collect a service charge for infrastructure maintenance. The system of provision is fragmented, and in general, respondents were dissatisfied with the amount they are charged. They also had concerns about infrastructure maintenance levels, which were sometimes poor or non-existent. For example, the DWMC in Liwang 5 built a dam at the water source, but this now needs major repairs and the committee lacks the technical or financial capacity to repair it. The dam area is not protected, children swim in it and local people wash clothes there. People have shared their concerns with the VDC and District Development Committee (DDC), but their *'concerns are not heard by these authorities'* (Female respondent, Liwang).

Figure 1: Time taken to fetch drinking water



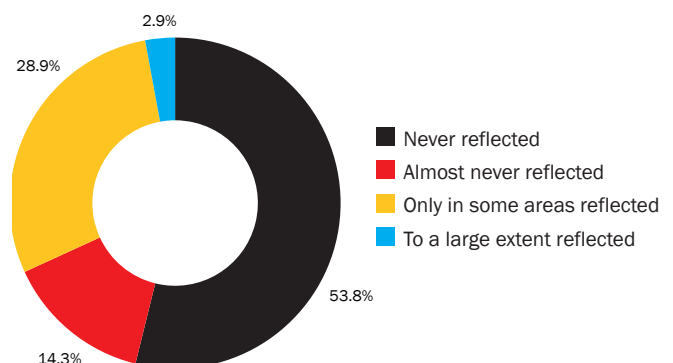
The survey also found no effective mechanisms for resolving inequalities in water supply between wards. For example, Ward 9 of Budagaon VDC does not have a permanent source of drinking water, but negotiations with a neighbouring ward have not resulted in any sharing of supply, even though some of the neighbouring ward's water goes unused. Such conflicts over resource allocation and distribution, even within the small political boundary of a VDC, can be critical.

2. Access to drinking water is mainly through taps – but not at home

Rolpa is rich in fresh water resources, but the rugged terrain is a major barrier to water service delivery. The majority of households studied depend on public taps, surface water sources such as rivers, unprotected wells, dams and other poor-quality water sources. Just 3.5% of households access water at their house, while 88.3% walk for up to 30 minutes to fetch water (see Figure 1). Just over 7% walk between 30 and 60 minutes to fetch water. Nor does drinking water necessarily have the highest priority out of the range of possible water uses: irrigation often has a higher priority (Acharya et al, 2015).

In terms of availability of drinking water, 45.9% of households replied that their water is 'always available', 31% said 'mostly available', and 21.8% said that drinking water is 'sometimes not available'. Just 1.3% said drinking water is 'often not available'. Households that manage their drinking water themselves have a more regular water supply than those using a community- or government-managed supply. Overall, nearly 89% of sampled households said they have access to safe and clean water. Of the 289 households that get water from a government-managed source, 91.3% (264) consider their water clean and safe. Of the 263 households that get water from a privately-managed source, 84.4% (222) thought their water clean and safe. All but two of the 77 households getting water from an NGO-managed source considered their water clean and safe (97.4%). These perceptions of water safety do not mean that their water is *actually* safe to drink: most rural areas still do not have clean and safe drinking water facilities, and water-borne diseases are widespread:

Figure 2: Perception of whether central government reflects people's priorities





Only the females are supposed to fetch drinking water for household use, it is not justice
 Female respondent, Liwang

Gender discrimination is still evident in the fetching of drinking water

The survey also noted that households that have experienced a greater number of shocks tend to have the least access to drinking water, and usually need to walk further to fetch it.

3. Women still fetch the water – but other forms of discrimination seem to have reduced

In terms of gender, the survey found discrimination relating to the fetching and use of water, as patriarchal rural beliefs mean that ‘water fetching’ is seen as a job for females:

Only the females are supposed to fetch drinking water for household use, it is not justice.
 (Female respondent, Liwang)

Where households are farther from the drinking water source, this can intensify the effects of gender-based discrimination: for example, water-fetching by school-age girls reduces the time available for them to attend school.

However, discrimination based on caste, which previously had an impact on people’s access to drinking water services, appears to have decreased to a large extent, although exceptional cases of discrimination in some remote wards of the VDCs have occurred. More than 80% of the respondents believe that discrimination based on caste does not exist. Some respondents credited the Maoist insurgency for helping to reduce discrimination:

Because of the several human rights advocacy programmes, Dalits [members of the lowest caste], women, minority people and backward people have been able to influence the service provider. Maoist insurgency also helped a lot to increase awareness among the people. (Male respondent, Janajati)

One Dalit woman, working as a cook in a school hostel, reported a very positive experience of the reduction in caste-based discrimination:

No such discriminations are here. Even if I am a Dalit woman, I do not feel I am being discriminated against.
 (Female respondent, Budagaon)

4. Political factors affect communities’ access to water

The study area consists of different communities and types of service providers, and individuals’ and households’ experiences with those providers vary widely. However, their experiences regarding bureaucratic delays, corruption and other barriers are similarly perceived. People complain that if they need budget allocations for drinking water management, they need to find prominent people to influence the VDC and other bureaucratic entities.

Respondents vigorously agreed on the importance of a local area’s political influence. Local politicians and ex-politicians, bureaucrats and other social elites are all perceived as influential in the drinking water services sector, and respondents reported that their prejudices can result in inequitable water service distribution. Some respondents thought that their community was excluded from a service because their area did not have influential political people who could bargain for more VDC budget allocations:

There is discrimination based on political affiliation – if some political leaders’ political ideology differs to the ideology of some community people, there is zero chance of development. (Male respondent, Liwang 4)

Where local or central government is capable of managing and ensuring effective and accountable service delivery at local level, it shapes people’s perception in a positive way. The quantitative survey found that people have comparatively more positive perceptions of local government than of central government. Of the 446 respondents to the question of whether the decisions of those in power in central government reflect respondents’ priorities, the majority felt that central government ‘never reflected’ their priorities (see Figure 2).

More positive feedback came from respondents who had become actively involved in managing their own water. Through the formation of local water users groups, they had become more aware of the resources, incentives and risks involved in service provision.

Overall, while most of the respondents agree and report that the local authorities' claim of narrowing the gap in budget allocation between urban and rural areas is true to some extent, disparities are still significant. The provision of drinking water was still seen as lacking transparency about how much is allocated and how much is spent in different programmes, who provided the funds and how they are channelled:

I am not satisfied with how the VDC has been involved in the supervision of the water delivery. I have seen the role of VDC very minimum. The VDC budget is not transparent. VDC Office has not been able to influence the effectiveness and accountability of service provision in local area, its one and only responsibility has been to distribute budget. (Male respondent, Liwang)

Conclusions and recommendations

The survey found that all stages of drinking water service provision - planning, design, implementation and sustainability - were vulnerable to a range of physical, financial, administrative and political constraints. Provision in rural areas lags substantially behind urban areas, and in the area surveyed, just 3.5% of households access water at home. The poorest households have the lowest level of basic access to drinking water, and progress on 'safe and clean' drinking water has been slowest in the least developed wards, where people have low incomes, fewer political connections and limited water resources. In some places, water resources are plentiful, but poorer people are still using unimproved and unprotected water sources.

In the areas surveyed, water provision, whether for drinking, irrigation, or sanitation, appeared to be low on local and central government's lists of priorities. Respondents tended to have comparatively more positive perceptions of local government than of central government, whom they felt did not share their priorities.

Ensuring good drinking water is a multi-faceted problem, involving the improvement of drinking water sources, investing

in infrastructure and safe water storage, promoting water safety awareness and household water treatment, and promoting household storage to harvest rainwater. On the basis of the survey, Nepal appears to lack institutional capacity to manage its water resources, and there is little consistency amongst state and non-state actors in the provision of water supplies or whether users are charged or not. Provision is, at best, patchy, which does not bode well in light of the ever-growing demand for water.

Charting practicable paths for improving water management in the face of increasingly scarce water supplies is important for sustaining local livelihoods. Although access is an important element of the drinking water supply system, other equally important elements are the quality of service, the accountability of service providers, and people's sense of ownership of the service. We recommend that stakeholders, policymakers and development partners consider doing more to make water management a priority, by:

- **Introducing measures to place drinking water management on a more demand-based footing**, by expanding water supply, distributing water equitably and controlling leakages;
- **Actively promoting inter-ward/VDC/District and inter-agency cooperation**;
- **Working to ensure adequate drinking water service delivery**, by considering improvements in drinking water sources, investment in infrastructure and safe water storage, promotion/awareness of safe water supply and household water treatment; and
- **Establishing water banks and institutions that could manage short-term water transfer** in the dry season in more arid areas, and **doing more to encourage economic use of scarce drinking water** in the face of Nepal's geographical complexity and likely increasing demand for water.

Written by Gopikesh Acharya, Bishnu Raj Upreti, Suman Babu Paudel, Annal Tandukar and Paul Harvey

This briefing paper is based on the following SLRC working paper: **The drinking water service and users' perceptions of the state in Rolpa, Nepal** (http://securelivelihoods.org/publications_details.aspx?resourceid=372)

References

Acharya, G., Upreti, B.R., Paudel S.B., Tandukar, A. and Harvey, P. (2015). *'The drinking water service and users' perceptions of the state in Rolpa, Nepal'*. SLRC Working Paper 35. London: Secure Livelihood Research Consortium.

Acharya, G. (2015) 'Conflict and co-operation dynamics of politics in South Asian water security', in Aneel S.S., Haroon U.T. and Niazi I., *Creating momentum: Today is tomorrow*. Islamabad: Sustainable Development Policy Institute (SDPI) and Sang-e-Meel Publications (Lahore): 295-309.