



28th WEDC Conference

Kolkata (Calcutta), India, 2002

SUSTAINABLE ENVIRONMENTAL SANITATION AND WATER SERVICES

A gender and poverty approach in practice

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THIS PAPER IS an output of a three-year ongoing process of mainstreaming a gender and poverty (GAP) approach in the programme of Nepal Water for Health (NEWAH). The paper is aimed at sharing lessons learned and the challenges ahead. Since 1999 the UK government (DFID) has funded the development of a GAP Approach in NEWAH.

The paper begins by describing the present situation and challenges in the Nepal context and the relevance of practicing a GAP approach. The other part describes how awareness and capacity building of NEWAH's staff and lessons learned from practice of a GAP approach in 5 pilot projects, are changing the policies and working practices of NEWAH¹.

Equitable access and a sustainable supply of water are fundamental to the goal of eliminating poverty. Unsustainable supplies and inequitable access to water are a drain on the lives and livelihoods of the world's poorest men, women and children. International thinking has focused on decentralised, demand-driven approaches. This approach was based on a belief that community-centred approaches, which respond to demand, would prove more sustainable. NEWAH's experience over the past 10 years is that the demand driven approach has not always been a success. In practice many agencies are neglecting to invest in the necessary ingredients. What is needed to ensure institutions and programmes are able to enhance capacities for equitable demand-driven community management? The essential ingredients include a long-term approach that seriously attempts to address gender equity and poverty issues. It requires an approach that addresses power relations, to understand and overcome difficulties experienced by common property institutions. Such an approach raises questions such as whose demands are heard? Is it the elite or everyone in a community? The question of who can participate and who is included is crucial in addressing poverty reduction.

In reality communities comprise of men and women who are better off and men and women who are poorer or poorest. In Nepal demand for project services by the 'community' are too often demanded by the powerful, better off and high caste men of the community, with little or no prior consultation with women and poorer/lower caste men (Dalit) and ethically disadvantaged men. It naturally follows that it is these better off men who are the first to come forward to liaise with project staff, take the management decision-making positions in the Water User Committees and effectively take control over ownership of water supply systems. This evidence suggests that when

water is treated as a commodity, access to water management roles of women and the poorest is increasingly taken over by better off men.

There are plenty of examples in Nepal where the self-interests of elite male-dominated rural WUC groups have led to conflict. Examples include inequitable and non-transparent financing. Illegal pipe connections by the better off has affected equitable water distribution in a number of communities, which in turn has led to irregular user fee payments and breakdown of water systems. Ultimately such conflicts have led to unequal access and control over safe drinking water systems. Who suffers most? It is always women and the poorest who have no voice or choice in decision making. So how does an agency address gender and class/caste inequities? The answer is with a great deal of commitment to change deeply embedded negative attitudes over the longer term.

NEWAH's commitment to addressing gender equity and poverty issues began by allocating resources for gender awareness and skills building of its staff to address gender and poverty issues at community level. It established a Gender and Poverty Unit in 1999, comprising of 32 technical and social staff. Five regional operational GAP teams and one team based at headquarters were created. Table A highlights the key elements of NEWAH's GAP approach. After a period of training and practice by delivering gender awareness training to peers in NEWAH, partners and communities, the teams began in 2000, to pilot a GAP approach in 5 projects throughout Nepal. The GAP approach recognises that without agency intervention, poor men and women are automatically excluded by elites from managing community water supplies.

In order to be poverty sensitive, it is necessary to identify who the poorest actually are. A Well-Being Ranking PRA exercise was introduced in the GAP pilot projects to determine who contributes what. Identifying the poorest households enables NEWAH and communities to provide additional support such as paid labour, free latrines and differentiated financial contributions for O&M, in agreement with the community management committee. The households themselves decided the criteria for each socio-economic group and ranked households into groups. Criteria included amount of land ownership, food sufficiency, employment/income, indebtedness such as bonded labour and disability. In the pilot projects most often the lower caste households filled the lower socioeconomic groups, but not exclusively. However, there were no lower caste households in the richest groups, reflecting the link be-

Table 1. Key elements of the GAP approach

- supporting women to be more actively involved in all the work of the project- e.g. decision on tap-stand/tubewells location and structure
- identifying who the poor actually are, to determine who contributes what
- supporting ways to increase women representation to 50% in the PMC¹
- exploring ways to use women's leadership qualities and decision-making capacities
- enhancing management capacities of communities for them to become managers and owners of their water supply and sanitation system giving attention to legal issues, transparency in decision-making and money handling
- providing poor women and men the opportunity to carry out paid work, skilled and unskilled
- providing gender awareness training to both men and women in the community
- providing health, hygiene and sanitation education to both men and women, boys and girls ('in-school' and out-of-school')
- providing confidence building and awareness raising so that poor and also better off women, who are often not allowed to participate in public events, can claim the right to participate more in community activities
- providing training and education to women and men in income generation; kitchen gardening and savings and credit
- exploring ways to increase latrine construction by providing subsidies to the poorest households and through children's committees
- exploring ways to motivate the community to adopt graded rate system of maintenance fund collection on the basis of social justice
- **analysing household and community activities by women and men**

tween caste and poverty. The results of the exercise were presented in a mass community meeting and debated until a consensus was reached.

The GAP approach aims to achieve a 50/50 gender balance in management committees. This is to help ensure women participate in decision making with men over water resources and to minimise management committees being dominated and controlled by male elites. GAP teams were pro-active in persuading communities of the benefits of active mixed gender committees for increased democratic community decision-making. The results of the 5 GAP pilot projects are very encouraging. Women were elected into 50% of the 4 key positions in the management committees (Chair, Vice-chair, Treasurer and Secretary). NEWAH will monitor the performance of these committees, particularly women's roles in decision-making and identify future support they require to continue to be effective. Equally important is the increased representation of poorer, lower caste men and women in decision-making positions in committees.

GAP teams evolved their own strategies for supporting women and poorest/low caste groups to enable them to achieve equal access to project information, training and paid job opportunities. This involved many informal meetings and discussions, such as negotiating with richer/elite groups of men and women, encouraging women and poor men to attend meetings and to voice their opinions. Building confidence of women and men to allow women to train in technical jobs and to take key positions in community

management committees was also a key activity. GAP teams reported that the GAP pilot projects presented team members with major challenges, especially in facilitating discussions on very sensitive gender and poverty issues. The GAP teams feel they have gained confidence and skills in implementing a GAP approach. Dealing with initial resistance by elites to avoid conflicts was a very real concern for staff at the beginning of the process. The fact that no conflicts were experienced in the community and significant results were achieved has considerably increased the confidence of GAP staff.

The GAP approach also recognises that community level financing of water services, usually in the form of flat rate user fees, often penalises the poor. A graded rate maintenance system for O&M has been piloted with some communities, which allows for the poorer socio-economic groups to pay less than the better off groups. Despite initial resistance by some better off households, these households were subsequently persuaded by the community management committee and GAP staff to participate in the system on the basis of sustaining the livelihoods of the poorest and the water system. NEWAH will monitor the progress of these graded rate systems of payment in the longer term for impact on sustainability and livelihoods.

NEWAH's recent experience is that consulting women as well as men on technology design options ensures technology is appropriate to meet both men and women's practical needs. Under the GAP approach women have been the primary decision makers over the number, location and

position of tapstands and tubewells to ensure their practical needs are met. For example tapstands that have to be located by a busy trail have, at the request of women, been positioned facing away from the trail to increase privacy. Women were consulted on height of parapets used by them to wash clothes and height of faucets. Through consultation with women as well as men, some GAP communities have even opted for community-financed communal bathing units.

NEWAH has a flexible policy relating to the number of tapstands per cluster of households. In situations of caste conflict that cannot be overcome, tapstands will be built separately, particularly for isolated, low caste, deprived houses. This is an important dimension in addressing caste discrimination and ensuring equal access to safe drinking water. In one GAP project a small cluster of 3 low-caste households opted for a smaller tapstand to reduce their contribution in local materials for cement and because they felt they did not require a full-size tapstand. In another project clusters of high caste and low caste households agreed they should and could share a water point.

Free latrines to the poorest households were introduced because the poorest households cannot afford to purchase permanent latrines. Temporary latrines have not been effective as they are perceived as 'kutcha' or poor quality and therefore not worth maintaining. Over 95% of the poorest households in the GAP pilot projects benefited from a free permanent latrine (sanitation slabs that cost 2 GB pounds). However, some households were unable to build a latrine due to being landless and other strategies will need to be considered for landless households. NEWAH will monitor this initiative to assess the effective use of these latrines in the post-project phase. School latrines were constructed separately for boys and girls, taking into account practical gender needs.

The GAP approach recognises that men as well as women should have access to health, hygiene and sanitation education. Men, in their role as fathers, need to be encouraged to assist their children in changed hygiene practices such as handwashing after defecation and before eating. If every member of the family has access to increased health and sanitation knowledge, the impacts on health will be greater. In the GAP pilot projects men were often resistant to joining women in toilet health education, as they perceive health and hygiene to be the role of women. NEWAH recruited a male and female community health volunteer (CHV) in each project. The male CHVs were able to persuade more men to attend health education and to discuss health issues. The impacts of changed hygiene practice and related sharing of roles between husbands and wives will be evaluated in 2002.

NEWAH has been implementing a Child-to-Child health and sanitation approach in schools for 5 years. In the GAP projects this approach was expanded to 'out-of-school' children. The Child Health Awareness Committees (CHAC) were comprised of an equal number of boys and girls who trained both 'in school' and 'out-of-school' children in

health and sanitation education via posters, competitions and street theatre. The impacts of this approach have yet to be evaluated, but anecdotal evidence suggests this was a very successful initiative, as children were able to successfully act as agents for change. For example, applying pressure on parents to purchase and use a latrine. Perceptions of teachers and parents revealed there was improved personal hygiene in 75% of schools and improved school environment in 85% of schools. Perceptions of children, relating to school and family's changed hygiene practices will be obtained in a forthcoming evaluation.

The GAP approach recognises that poor men and women who are often 'volunteered by village elites' to contribute unpaid and unskilled labour in WATSAN projects are being penalised. NEWAH's projects require up to 50 days free labour days from each household, depending on the number of households and distance from roadhead, during construction of the water system, as part of the community contribution. This means that poor families are unable to work in their fields or as paid farm labourers during this period resulting in a loss of income. The GAP projects therefore introduced 50% payment of the standard daily labour rate for poor households who contributed unskilled labour.

The GAP approach places emphasis on paid job opportunities to women as well as men. Traditionally the male elites in a community come forward for training and paid job opportunities. In the GAP pilot projects women have been trained as paid system maintenance caretakers as well as men. This enables women to swiftly respond to breakdowns that immediately affect them, especially in the absence of men, who are increasingly away as seasonal labourers in other towns or cities. Women were also trained as paid sanitation masons, along with men. Some women were initially resistant to taking on technical jobs, because they feared being ridiculed by men and women in the community. Confidence and awareness building by NEWAH and partner staff enabled women to train and become effective in their new roles, with the support of the community.

In response to demand from communities, particularly women, NEWAH has introduced kitchen garden technical training. In the GAP projects this was accompanied by a small vegetable seed subsidy to all households. However, the number of kitchen gardens established was relatively low due to reasons including lack of land and lack of availability of seeds locally. In one community green vegetables do not form part of the diet and demand to grow them was therefore low. However, the majority of kitchen gardens established were by the poorest households. NEWAH will evaluate the results of this initiative, particularly whether households were actually able to increase their subsistence or cash income through kitchen gardens and the role of women in production and benefits to them.

All of the above GAP initiatives (except paid unskilled labour and a gender-sensitive savings and credit scheme) are now being phased into NEWAH's entire programme

from November 2001. The savings and credit initiative is still being piloted. While paying for unskilled labour contributions was found to be a successful poverty reduction initiative for the poorest households, it adds to costs of projects. This initiative will be phased into NEWAH's programme, pending the GAP evaluation results and availability of donor funds.

As part of phasing-in of the GAP approach throughout NEWAH's programme, NEWAH plans to train a second phase of GAP teams in the summer of 2002 as basic gender awareness trainers. Each regional office will then have two GAP teams (12 staff) able to implement up to four GAP projects in each region from 2002. This will enable NEWAH to further build in-house capacity to comprehensively implement, monitor and evaluate gender and poverty-sensitive projects. Without this in-house gender training capacity at all levels, NEWAH would not be able to gender awareness train the 50-60 new communities and local partners it works with each year. In 2002 the GAP approach will be integrated in around 35% of NEWAH's programme, with 100% integration achieved by 2004.

NEWAH as a changing institution is also shaping the behaviour of its partner organisations in promoting pro-poor policies and implementing them at community level. In the 5 GAP pilot projects, NEWAH oriented partners on the rationale of a GAP approach, provided gender and poverty awareness training and skills building at community level, to enable successful implementation and facilitation of a GAP approach. By 2004, it will be in a position to influence the behaviour of up to 60 partner organisations and communities with whom it works annually.

Conclusion

Scaling up gender and poverty-sensitive community management of WS&S systems is needed, but it requires institutional commitment, resources, time and long-term support. What is important is a change in institutional attitude in accepting and implementing approaches to enhance

gender sensitive and pro-poor community management. It is essential to view women and men in a community as equal, regardless of caste or class, and to respond to their needs. This important dimension is often neglected in all stages of a project cycle. Addressing gender and poverty issues can substantially contribute to achieving equitable access and sustainability for poverty reduction.

Should you be interested in obtaining more information, please do not hesitate to contact us at e-mail: gap@newah.com.np or at NEWAH, PO Box 4231, Kathmandu, Nepal.

References

- 1 NEWAH, Nepal Water For Health, is a non-government, non-political and non-profit making organization working throughout rural Nepal to provide clean safe drinking water, hygiene education and sanitation. It aims to improve the living standard of the poor by providing community development initiatives.
- 2 PMC is Project Management & Maintenance Committee in the community.

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