

PROJECT BRIEF

INCLUSIVE AND SUSTAINABLE RURAL WATER SUPPLY SERVICES IN NEPAL (2018-2022)



Accelerating inclusive and sustainable rural water services in Nepal

In support of the Government of Nepal's WASH Sector Development Plan (2016-2030), SNV worked together with UTS-ISF, CBM Australia, rural municipalities, Rural Women Upliftment Association, and Everest Club to sustain hygiene behaviours and ensure the adequate quantity, quality, accessibility, and reliability of existing water supply services in the Dailekh and Sarlahi districts of Nepal. The partnership reached close to 156,000 people across eight selected rural municipalities between 2018 and 2022. Today, nearly 41,000 more people than in 2018 have access to a basic hand washing facility with soap, and almost an additional 76,000 have access to safely managed water supply at a household level.

Nepal is home to more than 41,000 rural water supply schemes, many of which require significant repair, rehabilitation, or replacement. In the plains of the terai (the lowland regions in southern Nepal), water quality is an issue, with many wells and hand pumps providing contaminated groundwater. Schools and health facilities have poor access to water supply and consequently face huge challenges when it comes to maintaining hygiene – particularly during monsoon season.

With over 100 ethnic groups, Nepal has a high level of ethnic, cultural, and religious diversity. This diversity translates to group-specific beliefs, age-old taboos, and discriminatory practices, particularly regarding the status of women and

girls, people living with disabilities, and menstrual health and hygiene management.

While there are already policies in place across Nepal for water supply management and inclusive services, operationalising these at the sub-national level is a priority. This has been the case since the new federal government system was introduced following constitutional changes in 2015. Under this change, rural municipalities (RMs) gained a significant level of autonomy and funding to oversee the development of their respective administrative areas. However, without proper training and adequate budgets to deliver universal water supply services, many lacked the ability to effectively fulfil their roles and responsibilities.

Climate change effects are compounding these challenges, increasing the vulnerability of mountain and hill districts to landslides, changing the yield of water sources, and increasing flooding in the terai.

SNV has been a development partner of the Nepal government since 1980. As part of our Beyond the Finish Line (2018-22) multi-country project, SNV supported the Government of Nepal to address and plan for foreseeable water-related challenges in both terai and hills settings, which represent groundwater and gravity-fed systems respectively. Our intention was to co-create the conditions for inclusive and sustainable rural water supply services and hygiene to thrive. This meant focusing on building the capacity of RMs, local organisations, and community groups to fulfil their water governance mandates through skills building, budget advocacy, the development of climate resilient water supply strategies and Behaviour Change Communication (BCC) campaigns, and ensuring equity and inclusion in water supply services in partnership with Disabled People’s Organisations (DPOs).

Today, 99% of the total population in four RMs in Dailekh and four RMs in Sarlahi districts now have access to at least basic hygiene services and 99% have access to basic water supply services.¹

Map 1: Focus districts in Nepal



Strengthening systems

Across both districts in Nepal, we have contributed to making safely managed water a reality for 75,600 people by carrying out BCC at point of use and rehabilitating existing water supply systems. Nearly 100 tubewells with hand pumps in the Sarlahi district, including source protection, were improved.

In Dailekh district, we upgraded 11 piped rural water supply schemes and introduced climate-resilient water safety plans alongside these, ensuring every household had access to a private tap stand.

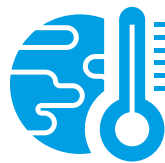
How did we achieve it?

Transforming systems in numbers (2018-2022)

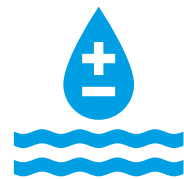
8 rural municipalities with more sustainable and inclusive water systems, each equipped with



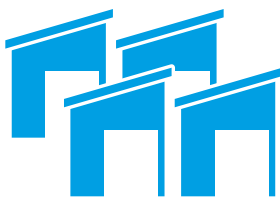
Disability help desks on location



Climate Resilient-Rural Water Services (CR-RWS) strategies



Water quality testing mini-labs operated by trained staff in RMs



53 hamlets recognised as Total Sanitation Toles (27 Sarlahi; 26 Dailekh)



under the leadership of ward-level WASH Coordination Committees



75 WOMEN ENTREPRENEURS trained and encouraged to add WASH items in their product/service offerings

¹ Figures in main body are rounded up to the nearest ten.

Practices

Our first step was to carry out formative research with CBM Australia on the experience of persons with disabilities in accessing water, sanitation, and hygiene services. We then supported the newly elected government representatives and DPOs to reactivate RM and ward-level WASH Coordination Committees (CC) and engaged with people with disabilities as regular members. By doing so, more inclusive processes for WASH planning, budgeting, implementation, and monitoring were operationalised.

With our support in facilitation and capacity building, every RM prepared and endorsed a climate-resilient water supply strategy with a vision for 2030, with particular emphasis on sustainability, equity, and inclusion. RM-wide water functionality surveys (including water quality tests) formed the basis of these strategies. The result? Allocated budgets for water supply service expansion and delivery to all.

Officials of RMs that participated in our trainings received orientation on key topics, including water quality testing; gender equality, disability, and social inclusion (GEDSI); Do No Harm; pre- and post-construction management; village maintenance workers and sustainability; and WASH entrepreneurship promotion for women. Accordingly, the project supported the eight RMs in developing their respective BCC strategies – with dedicated budgets – tailored to reach last-mile groups, such as people with disabilities, women, marginalised communities, Dalits, and other disadvantaged groups.

Resource flows

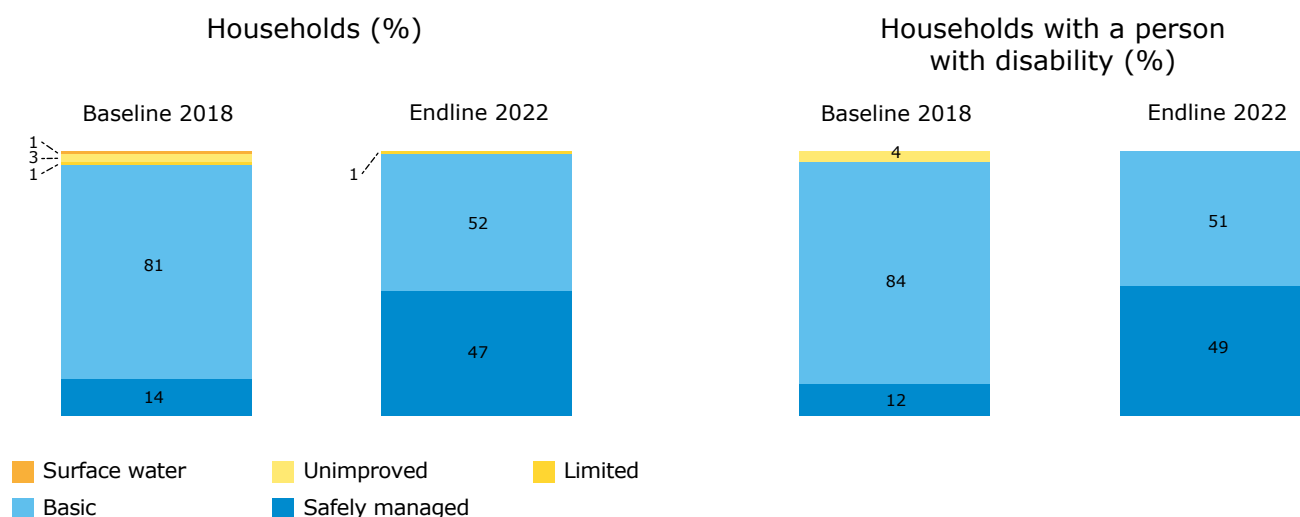
Our approach has helped to create more inclusive processes – shaping water supply development and services and BCC – through broader participation, openness, and transparency. In Dailekh district, SNV helped set up a transparent procurement process, with the participation of a multi-stakeholder procurement committee comprising members from four RMs, five water supply service providers, and a local support partner.

To secure the resources needed for the upgrade and sustainability of water supply services, we engaged RMs in a demonstration approach to model technical and process improvements that they subsequently replicated. Seeing how the models worked encouraged RMs to allocate adequate budget and feel a heightened sense of ownership over their decisions and interest in the proper maintenance of these schemes.

Once the strategies had been endorsed, we continued to lobby RM representatives to increase budget allocation for scaling up water supply services, water quality testing services, and BCC activities to serve more people in the RM, as well as support the operation of disability help desks.

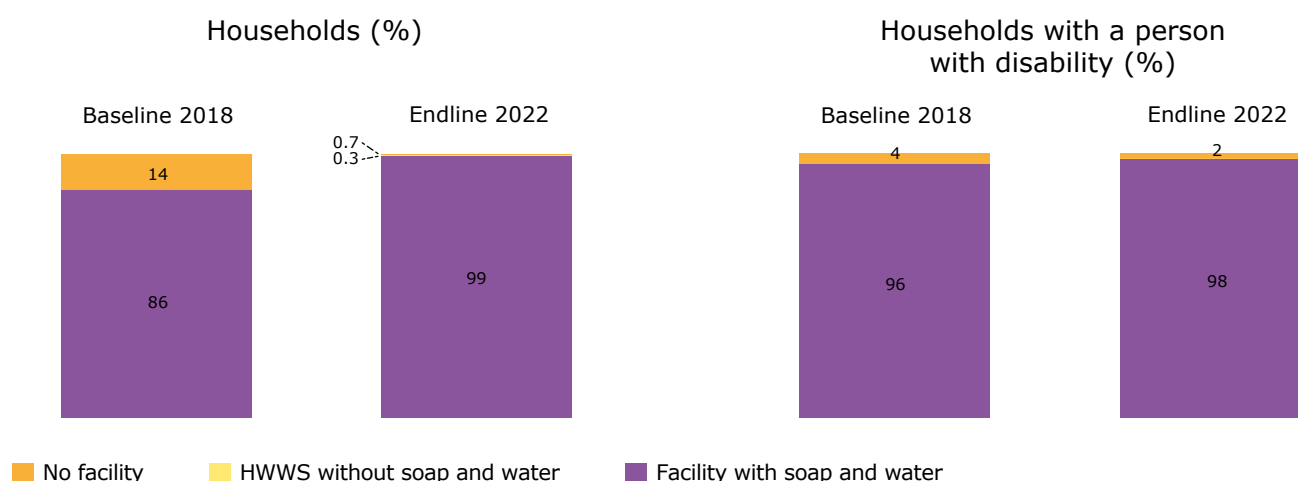
As a result, WASH financing has increased significantly over the last four years. The combined WASH budget of the eight RMs was a mere AUD 32,000 (US\$ 21,000) in 2019. For 2022-2023, the combined budget stood at AUD 998,300 (US\$ 665,500).²

Figure 1: Results of four-year programming in water supply access (2018-22)*



² SNV, Nepal-EOP01 Project reporting, internal report, 2023, unpublished.

Figure 2: Results of four-year programming in handwashing with soap access and practice (2018-22)*



* N.B. Data from SNV's Beyond the Finish Line project performance monitoring indicator survey, as per the JMP.

Power dynamics

The partnership supported the establishment of monitoring committees comprising the RM Vice Chairperson and two members of the Executive Board, Section Heads from RM departments of Planning, the Chief Executive Officer and Section Chiefs of the following sections: Education, Health, Technical and women, children and senior citizens), and the Ward Chairperson. We helped maintain co-ordination with these monitoring committees and engaged them for monitoring the water supply upgrade work in respective RMs. BCC focal points were also established at RM level for planning, monitoring, and review. This shifted the focus from infrastructure to services and ensured their adequacy across the districts. Ward-level WASH CCs now visit communities once a month to observe activities and understand the progress of WASH and BCC, as well as validate monitoring reports.

Public accountability over rural water supply projects has also improved with communities involved in supervision (with the supporting agency's technical team). Before construction work is considered officially complete, a public hearing is performed in the community to help explain the decisions made, achievements, expenses, materials, and consensus among the communities, water supply service operators, supporting agencies, and local government.

Emergence of disability help desks in RMs



In Nepal's past, people with disabilities had minimal opportunities to raise their WASH needs and concerns and they were hardly found within the ranks of government-led institutions. The result? Systems that failed to meet their requirements.

Ever since the introduction of Nepal's 'Relating to Rights of Persons with Disabilities Act 2074' in 2017, the responsibility of providing support to people with disabilities is now mandated across all three tiers of government.

At district level, we supported the establishment of disability help desks in eight RMs across Sarlahi and Dailekh districts. Four more are currently underway. Designed to be a one-stop destination where people with disabilities can access public services and information on the accessibility of WASH facilities and services, the help desks operationalised an existing policy and are run by paid staff with disabilities.

On average, approximately 50 people with disabilities visit the help desks every day, 40% of whom are women. Advisory and counselling services on disability are now within reach, and the help desks offer a new space to deposit and claim equipment provided through local government. In addition, for government institutions, the quality of data on WASH accessibility and other facilities has improved, meaning that better levels of support are now being provided at RM and ward levels.

Inspiring climate heroes

The impacts of climate change are evident, but for local governments, this reality can seem intangible and overwhelming.

We aimed to inspire Nepal's local governments to overcome barriers to addressing climate change and become champions of climate action for inclusive WASH.

Research we conducted with UTS-ISF found that local government officials were motivated, but sometimes had a limited sense of their mandates and low GEDSI awareness.

And so, the 'Climate Heroes' initiative was born. The aim was to introduce local government to the various ways they can carry out their mandates, e.g., through the co-creation of climate-resilient water safety or rainwater harvesting planning; community mapping of climate hazards; and facilitation of community dialogues to identify climate impacts on different people.

According to Ratan Budhathoki, SNV BFL Project Manager in Nepal:

'Local partners typically focus on disasters, but this project encouraged them to talk about the impacts and risks of climate change. As a result, they are now more comfortable to talk about climate change.'

Participating local government officials trialed their new skills in communities. Further, the lessons they gained encouraged them to revisit their own rural water supply strategies to make them more robust.



To address this, we trained 25 young men from Sarlahi and Dailekh on positive masculinity, which encouraged them to champion gender-fair roles. As a result, we observed the increased participation of young men in domestic work which, in turn, supported a change in the performance of CAD-related gender roles in several participating households.

Relationships and connections

The partnership's work in disability inclusion has increased the responsiveness of families, local government, and wider society towards people with disabilities. The participation of people with disabilities in community group committees has increased and is now mandatory in ward-level WASH-CC. Together, we have contributed to enhancing collaboration between local government and DPOs – one example is in the set-up of disability help desks.

Our recommendations

The success of SNV's collaboration with the RMs of Nepal's Sarlahi and Dailekh districts highlights the value of supporting key organisations to operationalise national government policies at the sub-national level and advancing water security through improved WASH governance. We achieved this through the co-development of RM WASH and BCC strategies, capacity building and sensitisation to GEDSI principles and actions, and demonstration processes and technical improvements for inclusive and sustainable rural water supply.



More inclusive planning spaces: a female participant in a Dailekh WASH meeting confidently expressing her views. Photo Credit: SNV/Meeting Point.

Social norms, values, behaviours, and attitudes

Our research explored the gender and social norms around household WASH, as well as the economic and social value of care and domestic (CAD) work. This work was part of our efforts to map out an inclusive economic recovery process informed by feminist approaches. Even during complete COVID-19 lockdown, men's engagement in care and domestic work was observed to be very limited and voluntary based.

As a high, mountainous Himalayan country, Nepal is already experiencing climate change, which is exacerbating poverty and inequalities. Rural communities are most vulnerable to these developments. To sustain and scale up the achievements seen to date in the face of climate change, our recommendations are as follows:

Monitor performance

Improved and strengthened technical and financial performance of water service providers must be monitored to gain further insights into the effectiveness of the support provided. This would also provide an opportunity to identify any modifications required if similar interventions are undertaken in future.

Review plans regularly

Support RMs in reviewing and revising water supply plans and WASH monitoring systems to align better with the sector monitoring system and the new WASH planning guidelines (N-WASH) at a national level. Some local plans, which had already been developed, may need to be adjusted to conform with the new guidelines. This way, plans gain full formal status and can be used in funding proposals to the federal government.

Strengthen climate resilience

Strengthen coping mechanisms at household and community level, improve inclusive WASH governance, and increase service provider capacities. To sustain gains already made across Nepal and to combat climate change, it will also be key to embed a water resource management perspective within rural water supply strategies, supported by a robust learning and inclusion agenda.

Inclusive and Sustainable Rural Water Supply Services - Nepal

Beyond the Finish Line-Inclusive and Sustainable Rural Water Supply Services in Nepal is a four-year project that professionalised gender, socially inclusive, and sustainable rural water supply services in Nepal's Dailekh and Sarlahi districts, impacting the lives of close to 156,000 people. Supported by the Australian Government's Water for Women Fund, the project was implemented by SNV in partnership with the local government (several rural municipalities) of Nepal, Rural Women Upliftment Association (RWUA) Sarlahi, Everest Club (EC) Dailekh, UTS-ISF, and CBM Australia.

SNV

SNV is a mission-driven global development partner working across Africa and Asia. Our mission is to strengthen capacities and catalyse partnerships that transform the agri-food, energy, and water systems, which enable sustainable and more equitable lives for all.

Cover photo

An older woman happily drawing safe drinking water from a water filter at her home, which was installed following SBCC activities in her community at Guransh RM, Dailekh district, Nepal. Photo credit: SNV/Meeting Point.



SNV, 'Accelerating inclusive and sustainable rural water services in Nepal', *Project Brief, Inclusive and Sustainable Rural Water Supply Services in Nepal (2018-2022)*, The Hague, SNV, 2023.

For more information

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