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Gender, Social Capital and Collective Action: A gender perspective on collective sustainability of water resource governance in west Nepal

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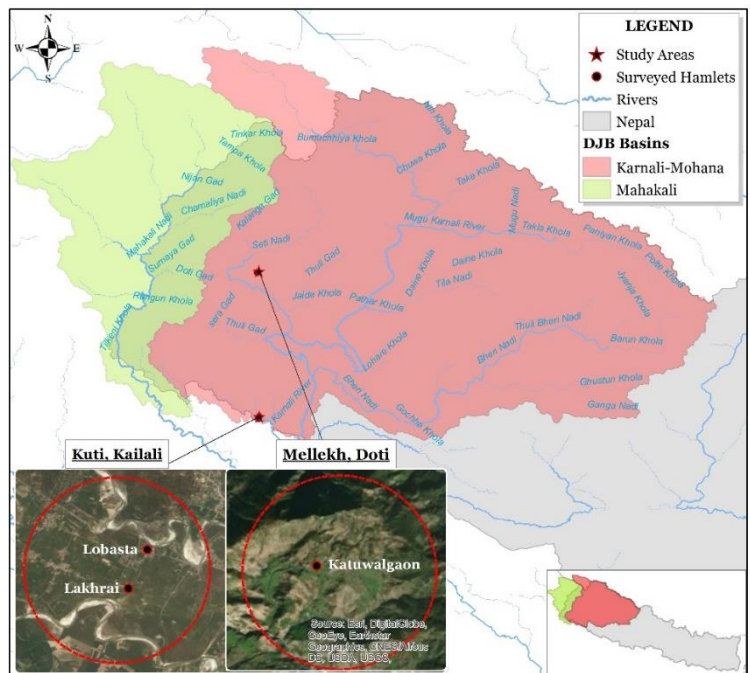
1. Challenge

In Nepal, as in other South Asian countries, water resource development is often considered to be a primarily technological challenge, requiring engineered solutions. Many years of advocacy for gender equality in water management - drawing attention to the need for local institutional changes has shifted this outlook. Thus, today women's participation in water user associations (WUA) is encouraged and identified to be key in enabling gender equality, a more equal participation in water governance, and a more equal share of water infrastructure and services. Nonetheless, these well intention efforts tend to overlook complex social dynamics in rural areas, which influence the effectiveness of women's participation. If initiatives to engaging women are to succeed in promoting gender equality, they must be considered in the light of the wider social and political contexts – of what makes for a community, a society.

2. Research Approach

This research investigates the interlinkages between social capital, capabilities and collective management of water resources in two villages in far western Nepal, one each in Doti and Kailali. Methods of data collection included well-being ranking, institutional venn diagrams, village mapping, in-depth interviews, key informant interviews, and participant observation. The respondents were sampled purposively from different caste, class, gender, age, education and social positions. Altogether 30

respondents (10 Males, 20 Females) in Kailali and 24 respondents in (12 Males, 12 Females) Doti were interviewed. To ease the language constraint especially with women who do not speak Nepali in Doti and Kailali, a local translator was hired at both research sites. Notes were taken in Nepali which was later transcribed in English and coded under emergent research themes. Efforts were made to interview members and non-members of community groups uniformly in order to gather different perspective on social capital and collective action.



3. Insights

- The proposed solutions centre on rural people's capabilities and social capital, which depend, in turn, on their access to information, knowledge and opportunities. While men obtain these through a variety of formal and informal interactions, women are limited to mostly informal activities, which they create and lead, with a primary focus on women's issues (such as health and nutrition). Men, in contrast, dominate discussions and management of key resources, like water, thus putting women at a disadvantage.

4. Next Steps

- Create more opportunities for women water professionals to play technical and non-technical roles in water organizations and projects; rural women will feel more comfortable to create social relations with female staff members thereby extending their social network beyond their community.
- Introduce incentives for organizations and projects to consider into account in their planning, implementation and monitoring how intra-household and intracommunity social relations shape access to water along gender, class, caste, and age lines and to conduct affirmative actions with the aim of diminishing the influence of these factors. Address intra-household gender relations through group methods [e.g. creating safe spaces to discuss on local gender and social norms <https://wle.cgiar.org/solutions/participatory-gender-training-community-groups>]. Without this support, a young married woman, especially with a migrant husband and young children, will find it difficult to take part in decision-making, even if she is literate and entirely capable of contributing to local water governance.
- Design policies and activities that enhance collective action in rural communities, based on increased trust and social well-being.

About the Digo Jal Bikas Project

The Western Region of Nepal has enormous potential for water resources development, which is critical for sustainable economic growth. To help realize this potential, the Digo Jal Bikas (DJB) project was initiated in April 2016 through a partnership between USAID, IWMI, KU, Duke University and NWCF. A key aim of the project was to find a balance between economic growth, social justice and resilient ecosystems, based on a more holistic understanding of water availability, accessibility, and governance. As the project nears its end, researchers have generated a sound knowledge base and developed new tools, models, approaches and guidelines to support decision-making in integrated water management, with a focus on three river basins in the Karnali and Surdurpaschim provinces, namely, the Karnali, Mahakali, and Mohana. For more details, check: www.djb.iwmi.org

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