



Assessing information needs in Nepal

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What are the information needs of village water committees and those who support them? Information needs assessments were undertaken to find out, with the result that villagers are now eager to be kept better informed.

Recognizing the many benefits that arise from relevant, accessible information, Nepal Water for Health (NEWAH) is undertaking a resource centre development programme with the support of IRC, Netherlands and in collaboration with the Integrated Development Society, Nepal. In January 2003, information needs assessments were organized to help identify potential activities to improve information targeting to the needs of various stakeholders in water, environmental sanitation and hygiene programmes in Nepal.

Nepalgunj and Biratnagar, where NEWAH has regional offices, were selected because of the developmental differences in both regions, which we assumed would have an impact on the nature of the information needs people

have. Differences exist in the technologies used for water supply between the mountainous areas and the flat *terai* areas in the south. For example, the problems and information needs of users and service providers of gravity flow systems are likely to be different from those of tube wells, and therefore we sought representation from water and sanitation committees and from support organizations (the intermediate level) from both the hills and the *terai*. Support organizations include governmental institutions, such as the District Development Committee, the District Water Supply Offices (DWSOs) and non-governmental organizations (in most cases, representatives of branch offices of international NGOs having a head-office in the capital).

Water committee members

In each region the number of participants was about 20 (including at least four women). For the workshop exercises they were divided into four groups:

- community (water committee) members from the hills
- community (water committee) members from the *terai*
- representatives from the intermediate level from the hills
- representatives from the intermediate level from the *terai*.

These participants were asked to focus on selecting priority problems, related information and knowledge needs and preferred forms and channels of information provision. Box 1 shows one example of how the topic was introduced so as to make information needs relevant to the participants.



Intermediate level representatives involved in group work during the Nepalgunj workshop

Box 1. How information might have helped increase efficiency

Two years after a project had finished, a villager had to spend Rs200 to travel to the DWSO to look for new brass taps. However, the DWSO was not the right place to buy spare parts. The district engineer told the villager to go to the market and get them there. In this case, if the villager had had information regarding the right place to go, he would not have travelled all the way to the DWSO – he would have gone to the market straight away. He could even have purchased a couple of additional taps with the money thus saved. This example helped the participants to understand what the workshop was all about and to relate to the idea of information needs.



It took some time for representatives to appreciate how readily accessible information sources could help solve their problems

Information for problem solving

It took some time for participants to realize that information can help solve problems. At the beginning of this exercise it was difficult to get answers to the question: 'what kind of information do you need to help solve the problems'. People are used to thinking in terms of funds and training to solve problems, and when funds and training are not given, the problems remain unsolved. They may not realize straight away that information on how and where to apply for funds or training can help.

For example, many water committees face difficulties in how to manage their maintenance fund. The information they need is about the training available for water committees to enhance their knowledge and to increase their skills in motivating people. They also need to know how to keep up-to-date records, to mobilize resources and to build trust between the users and committee members. The committee needs to learn how to motivate community members to pay for water and to take care of the system. Information is also important on how to create a sense of ownership and to ensure transparency.

The community members and participants from the intermediate levels

identified information needs for their most pressing problems, and these are summarized in Boxes 2 and 3.

Realizing the importance of information

The information needs assessment was an interesting and important exercise. To a large extent it was a validation of what we thought people in the field need, but what was even more exciting was that it helped all the people involved to realize the importance of information and how information

Box 2. Water committee members' information needs

The following needs were identified at the workshop.

- how to motivate community members to pay for water and to be careful with the system
- management skills, such as bookkeeping and conflict management
- availability and quality of spare parts and spare-parts management
- transmission routes of diseases and how to prevent diseases
- how to improve drainage and where to go for water quality testing.

Box 3. Intermediate level information needs

These needs were identified in the workshop:

- who is doing what and how (approaches used) in the district
- training opportunities about which they can tell communities
- the usefulness of alternative technologies and implementation approaches
- how to monitor effectively
- opportunities and methods for water-quality testing
- and how to motivate community members on hygiene issues, on proper use of facilities and on managing the maintenance fund.

can potentially help to solve problems. Because the workshops provided a platform for exchange between community people and district-level staff, they contributed to the development of mutual understanding.

Community members are very outspoken about their problems and the information needs they have, and there are quite a number of issues they require information on. If sector organizations want to be of service to them they should provide community members with accessible information outlining various alternatives that people can choose from. If we want to work on improving information provision based on information needs we may have to select a couple of areas to start with. Once experience is gained on how to improve information flows, the number of issues can be expanded.

Representatives at the intermediate levels would gain a lot by improved coordination and sharing of information on the work that is undertaken and the approaches applied in their districts. From the national level they expect better information on policies and on rules and regulations with respect to ownership issues.

The outcomes of the information needs assessments in Nepalganj and Biratnagar were fed back to the stakeholders in Kathmandu and at the regional and district levels. Building on what is already being done, these stakeholders are now developing and implementing a plan to make information sharing more effective.

Currently a resource centre network (RCN) of seven organizations has prepared the action plan. The proposal has been submitted to IRC and WaterAid Nepal for financial and professional support for the coming 18 months. We have asked WaterAid Nepal to be a network member and contribute to strengthen the network and its function.

The action plan of the resource centre network aims:

- to strengthen the collaboration at central level, then focus on the needs of intermediate and community levels gradually
- to identify and develop useful information products and disseminate them through newsletters, booklets and awareness campaigns.

NEWAH has planned to address one need of the community regarding spare parts. The objective is to document and disseminate effective information on the availability of spare parts through its newsletter and trainings. The channel for information sharing will be through NEWAH's own regional offices to community level and the resource centre network. Information to the intermediate level will be disseminated through sectoral newsletters, brochures and frequently asked questions (FAQs).

The other network organizations are planning to produce information according to their specialization and will disseminate the information through their own network and the RCN.

The impact of the efforts to address some of the needs of the community and intermediate level will be evaluated in 18 months' time.

About the authors

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Knowledge sharing and communication issues

The websites covered this time include organizations that have developed conscious strategies towards dissemination and knowledge sharing, as well as those which promote the use of ICTs (information and communications technologies) in development.

■ Knowledge management at WEDC

WEDC has developed a proactive strategy for knowledge transfer and research dissemination, and has extensive experience of paper and web-based information provision, networking activities and electronic conferencing. Find out more at:

<http://wedc.lboro.ac.uk/specialist-activities/interests.php?area=5>

■ Knowledge and information systems of the urban poor (KIS)

Part of Intermediate Technology Development Group's work on ICTs, KIS (knowledge and information systems) looks at how the urban poor obtain information and develop knowledge, whether they get what they require and how appropriate it is. It considers ways in which development agencies could fill the gaps and help to strengthen their KIS.

<http://www.itdg.org/home.html>

■ IDRC Information and communication technologies for development (ICT4D)

This is one area of activity of IDRC. It outlines their programmes and centres in Africa, Asia and Latin America and the Caribbean.

http://web.idrc.ca/ev.php?URL_ID=30321&URL_DO=DO_TOPIC#8

■ Bellanet

Bellanet promotes and facilitates effective collaboration within the international community, especially through the use of ICTs. It aims to support effective development practice by sharing its expertise in ICTs as well as its skills in facilitating organizational learning and the sharing of knowledge.

<http://home.bellanet.org/index.php?module=htmlpages&func=display&pid=1>

■ IRC Information and Communication

One of IRC's thematic areas is Information and Communication, working towards the creation of a communication culture, where dialogue and participation become second nature. This site links to different aspects of their work and relevant publications.

<http://www.irc.nl/content/view/full/119>

■ Max Lock Centre: Improving Knowledge Transfer

This set of guides is aimed at improving the exchange and transfer of knowledge gathered and generated by researchers to benefit the urban poor in developing countries.

<http://www.westminster.ac.uk/builtenv/maxlock/KTweb/KTHome.htm>

■ Global Applied Research Network (GARNET)

GARNET is a mechanism for information exchange in the water supply and sanitation sector using low-cost, informal networks of researchers, practitioners and funders of research.

<http://www.lboro.ac.uk/departments/cv/wedc/garnet/index.html>

■ Development Gateway

Working with developing countries to build partnerships and information systems that provide access to knowledge for development. Development Gateway exploits powerful and affordable ICTs that were previously unavailable to: increase knowledge sharing, enable aid effectiveness, improve public sector transparency and build local capacity to empower communities.

<http://www.developmentgateway.org/>

■ ODI Research and Policy in Development (RAPID)

ODI's Research and Policy in Development programme aims to improve the use of research in development policy and practice through improved knowledge about research-policy links, improved knowledge management and learning systems, improved communication and improved awareness of the importance of research.

<http://www.odi.org.uk/RAPID/index.html>

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