

West Myagdi Community Health Programme (WMCH), Nepal Organisation: International Nepal Fellowship

Chris Rudall (Seconded by Baptist Missionary Society)

Outline

Myagdi district is in the Western Region of Nepal. The first phase of this community health programme covered a fairly inaccessible region of small, scattered communities at altitudes in the range 1200m-3000m, between the Middle Hills and the Dhaulagiri/Gurja Himal Mountains. The weather pattern is typical of the Middle Hills of Nepal, with rainfall concentrated almost entirely in the June-September rainy season. The programme served a population of about 12000 people, the majority of whom are farmers, growing mainly wheat, maize and rice. High-caste (Brahmins and Chetris), low-caste and Magar and Chantyel tribal groups are all represented in the area. There are many good but unprotected water sources (springs and streams), but these are often accessible only via steep pathways and are often polluted by people and animals.

Activities

WMCHP is an integrated programme aimed at improving the health of the population via community activities, including Government Health Post support, mother/child clinics, school health programmes, literacy classes, horticultural and health activities, drinking water and sanitation. The drinking water work was entirely construction and rehabilitation of gravity feed schemes using water from either protected springs or remote streams. A total of 20 small gravity feed systems, plus additional spring protections, were constructed over a four-year period. Each scheme was initiated by request from the community, followed by planning, designs purchasing, construction and maintenance training phases. The work demanded a high degree of community commitment in terms of carrying equipment and site labour.

Successes

- **Basic health hygiene messages** were conveyed, especially to women and children via mother/child clinics, the school health programme and women's literacy classes.
- **Devolving power.** Early in the programme, we realised the need to shift 'ownership' of water schemes from the agency involved in the work towards the actual users. We began by establishing village level water committees, but these were invariably dominated by men, usually influential local figures. There were difficulties raising maintenance funds because no one trusted the committee. A small but significant success was to establish women's groups to look after their local tapstands and raise and administer their own contributions to the scheme maintenance fund. This was an effective way of devolving power and responsibility towards the end-user. It also helped to increase the confidence of women to manage their own affairs.
- **Health impact.** Taken as a whole, positive benefits have resulted from the programme. Over five years, the percentage of well-nourished 1-5 year olds increased from 70% to 80%.

Constraints

- **Male community leaders** continued to have great difficulty in understanding the importance of involving women in the planning and managing of water schemes.
- **Understanding** of basic scheme concepts was generally very poor, for example, the relationship between storing water in a tank and the need to turn off taps after use.
- **Preventive maintenance** is a poorly understood concept.

Lessons learned

- **Empowerment and ownership.** As the programme progressed, we became increasingly uncomfortable with imposing our specific health agenda on the community and being seen as a provider of services – a 'big cow there to be milked'. Whilst much was achieved, it was felt that the approach did not lead to an authentic sense of ownership or further the process of empowerment. The second phase of the programme, which is based on a neighbouring area, is taking a facilitating approach, designed to help community groups to understand and prioritise their own perceived needs, then follow through an action plan to bring about change themselves. The services of technical staff will still be available to these groups if requested. If other services are required by the community, the programme will assist community groups to make contact with government departments or other NGOs who can help.
- **Targeting the very poor.** We became increasingly concerned that the programme was not reaching through to the very poor in the community. They will always tend to hold back whilst more vocal and confident people will step forward to claim the benefits. In the water context, we had to take a firm stand at the planning stage to ensure that low-caste groups were adequately served. The message here is that it is not enough to classify an entire community as 'poor', since every community will tend to subdivide itself and marginalise sub-groups within it. In the programme's second phase, staff will take a proactive role in identifying and working specifically with marginalised groups.
- **Toilet construction.** It was decided at the beginning of the programme not to make toilet construction a pre-condition for going ahead with a water scheme. By taking a risk and relying on health messages conveyed through, for example, literacy material and the school health programme, we found that gradually people began to build toilets because they could understand the potential benefits, in terms of health and also convenience and privacy. In four years, the number of homes with toilets in use rose from 6% to over 50%.
- **A marketing lesson.** For villages where houses were too close together to build simple pit latrines, pour-flush pans were made and sold at a subsidised price. Because a value was put on them, demand was surprisingly high.
- **A 'democratic' approach is not always appropriate.** One remote village was 'ruled' by a very powerful leader, who was also sympathetic to the needs of the poorer groups within his community. It quickly became clear that a 'democratic' committee-based approach to planning the water scheme would not work. In this instance, the leader made most of the decisions on behalf of the community and the scheme progressed very well. This would seem to go against current development thinking but there may be a lesson here for agencies to take a flexible approach to the ways in which they are prepared to co-operate with communities.