

# Nepal

Civil society organisation involvement in urban water sector reform







WaterAid/  
Marco Betti

**A WaterAid publication written by Mary O'Connell.**

Edited by journalists at ngo.media ([www.ngomedia.org.uk](http://www.ngomedia.org.uk)) and Libby Plumb.

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This is one of a series of nine case studies outlining civil society organisations' (CSOs) involvement in urban water sector reform. The other case studies cover the following locations:

- **Bangladesh (Chittagong and Dhaka)**
- **Brazil (Recife) and Venezuela (Caracas)**
- **Ghana (Accra)**
- **Kenya (Kisumu, Nairobi and Mombasa)**
- **Pakistan (Karachi)**
- **Philippines (Manila)**
- **Uganda (Kampala)**
- **Ukraine**

The case studies accompany the guidance manual ***Our water, our waste, our town***, which offers support to civil society in engaging in urban water and sanitation reforms.

The manual and case studies can all be downloaded at:  
**[www.wateraid.org/urbanreform](http://www.wateraid.org/urbanreform)**



WaterAid's mission is to overcome poverty by enabling the world's poorest people to gain access to safe water, sanitation and hygiene education.

## Section one: Background and problem

In 1988, the Government of Nepal decided that a tunnel should be built from the Melamchi Valley to the Kathmandu Valley to improve the water supply in Kathmandu, Nepal's capital city. The Melamchi Water Supply Project (MWSP) was initially funded by a \$71 million loan from the World Bank. However, seven years later the project stalled when it was revealed that a fraction of this amount had actually been spent.

The World Bank demanded that an operator from the private sector be brought in before further funding was offered. This stipulation remained when the World Bank withdrew and

the Asian Development Bank (ADB) became the main donor. By 2006, Severn Trent Water International was the only company to have made a valid bid for the project.

The MWSP was an expensive project funded by a substantial foreign loan, which the government would have to repay. The tunnel was taking years to materialise and there was concern that the ordinary people of Kathmandu, especially the 40,000 poor citizens living without a water connection, would have no say in the design and planning of the project and no share in its potential benefits.

## Section two: What CSOs have done

The NGO Forum for Urban Water and Sanitation was created in March 2001 to help ensure that people in urban areas, especially the poor, have access to clean, affordable water and sanitation services which exist in harmony with the environment. The NGO Forum is made up of many different NGOs working on issues such as urban development, environmental conservation and poverty reduction.

The NGO Forum wanted to make sure that, despite the private sector being involved, the MWSP would benefit the poor and not just Nepal's middle class and economic elites. They also wanted to involve civil society in the government's decision-making process and give the local community a real say in how their water services were run.

## The NGO Forum undertook the following steps:

- 1. Shared knowledge**

Before joining the debate, the NGO Forum researched the history of water supply in the area and made this information publicly available. Because previous discussion had taken place almost entirely in English, the NGO Forum organised the translation of key documents into Nepali.
- 2. Gathered evidence**

A study entitled *Enumeration and mapping of slums, squatters and public stand-posts*, conducted with the support of WaterAid, revealed that a large proportion of poor people still have no connection to the main water pipeline and have to depend on unreliable public stand-posts. This study was conducted and supervised by a task force representing the NGO Forum, the Nepali Government, the Asian Development Bank and the Japanese Bank of International Cooperation (JBIC). The study resulted in a rethink on water access for poor people and plans to improve public stand-posts.
- 3. Helped the local community find its voice**

In 2005, when the government presented three bills to parliament related to water management and distribution, the NGO Forum was concerned that the public had not been consulted on the issues that affected them. To make sure the community's views were heard, the NGO Forum started community consultations in poor areas and trained community leaders to lead discussion groups and gather local opinion.
- 4. Took community concerns to the decision-makers**

All through this process, the NGO Forum organised meetings with the government and project donors to discuss people's concerns and present ideas for discussion. They also urged parliamentarians to consult with the people and not let bills become acts in parliament without pro-poor amendments.
- 5. Researched alternative water sources**

Hand-dug wells and stone spouts are a traditional part of life in Nepal and important sources of safe water. As the MWSP would take years to build, the NGO Forum saw the importance of promoting and conserving alternative water supplies. The NGO Forum mobilised volunteers to map out these valuable resources and help their users organise themselves into associations that could manage the water points.
- 6. Advocated to improve water quality**

Following a serious cholera outbreak in 2004, the NGO Forum started monitoring the quality of the local water supply. The quality of the monitoring programme was recognised by the government and over the last two years water quality monitoring and mitigation programmes have been carried out jointly by civil society and the government.



## The NGO Forum undertook the following steps (continued):

7. **Provided policy support**

The NGO Forum provided information to the government about where care needed to be taken in negotiating private sector contracts.

public debates, improving responsive accountability by service providers and donors.

8. **Media engagement**

The NGO Forum has constantly engaged with the media in all of its major initiatives in order to strengthen pressure for reform by stakeholders and to keep the mass public informed.

10. **Value based water education**

The NGO Forum not only builds social pressure and acts as a bridge between service providers, donors and citizens, but it also promotes education aimed at the conservation of traditional water resources, optimising water use and making people, particularly students, aware of water purification techniques and conservation.

9. **Public debates and accountability**

New proposals and reform mechanisms have been aired in



*A WaterAid study showed that 45% of people in poor areas of Kathmandu lacked access to safe, adequate water supplies.  
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## Section three: Challenges and outcomes

### Challenges

The stakes were high for Nepali society and the issues involved in the debate were very complex, requiring time and energy from both NGOs and civil society. At the outset, much of the data the NGO Forum needed to form their arguments was ambiguous, incomplete or simply non-existent. The situation wasn't helped by the fact that for many NGOs, the issues involved did not fit clearly within their mandates.

On top of this, it was difficult to raise concerns with the government, as Nepal is a young democracy with no tradition of consulting civil groups.

The NGO Forum was eventually offered a place on the Kathmandu Valley Water Supply Management Board – a body formed to manage Kathmandu's water supply. Despite their mandate for constructive engagement, the NGO Forum considered the offer for many years. They were concerned that their views would be ignored and they didn't want to provide the government with a way to pay lip service to the poor.

Eventually the NGO Forum agreed to put a member on the board, reasoning that they could still lobby the government by other means if they felt that their concerns were being swept aside.

### Outcomes

By taking the concerns of civil society and the poor to the government, the NGO Forum was part of the discussion process that ended with the proposal for the Low Income Consumers Support Unit. This body will be charged with protecting access to safe water for the poor.

By commissioning maps detailing access to water in poorer areas, the NGO Forum created data that could be used as technical information for water operators as well as statistical ammunition to lobby the government for pro-poor reforms. Priority has now been given to providing water for areas with high numbers of people without access to water.

The NGO Forum mobilised volunteers to map alternative water resources with the aim of helping their users to organise themselves into associations. The NGO Forum hopes these organisations could be part of a social movement that will advocate for government policy for sustainable water sources. The maps will in turn be useful for member organisations of the NGO Forum who plan to renovate these resources.

The NGO Forum's work to highlight water quality in the Kathmandu Valley, though initially embarrassing for the government, led to the formation

of a formal monitoring mechanism including the government and water consumers.

Within the ordinances proposed to parliament was a clause suggesting the private operator should remove public stand-posts. However, communities consulted by the NGO Forum saw access to the stand-posts as their right. The communities were willing to pay collective connection charges but demanded the charges be lowered and the taps renovated. The NGO Forum took these concerns to the donors and were told the connection charge would be reduced from 15–20,000 rupees (around \$150–\$200) to 2,000 rupees (around \$20).

Though the NGO Forum admits it is sometimes difficult to see how its advocacy work influenced the evolution of the MWSP, it believes its work has successfully helped take the concerns of some of the poorest people in Kathmandu direct to the government and donors.

The NGO Forum is aware that many of the reforms it has fought for currently only exist on paper or as promises from donors. The real test will be if and when the contract is officially signed and provisions for the poor come into being.

### What happened next

In 2007, a review by the NGO Forum highlighted that the proposed management contract was flawed and did not contain sufficient obligations

on the contract manager to operate in an accountable and pro-poor manner. The NGO Forum called for the document to be revised and brought into the public domain before a license was issued to the proposed contractor (who at the time was Severn Trent Water International.)

*The NGO Forum negotiated for public stand-posts not to be removed.*  
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## Section four:

# Lessons learnt and top tips

### Lessons learnt

By commissioning studies, translating documents and sharing their contents with the community, the NGO Forum could take the concerns of Kathmandu Valley's urban citizens to the government.

The NGO Forum developed skills in influencing policy and developing alternative strategies when conflict arose. It persevered through criticism from the government of mobilising wider society against privatisation and from anti-privatisation groups for engaging with the private company and financiers involved in the project.

### Top tips

- 1. Find common ground with other NGOs.**  
Not all the members of the NGO Forum had a clear mandate where the MWSP was concerned – but they still managed to pool knowledge and resources to address the problem.
- 2. Have the facts on your side.**  
By gathering relevant technical data the NGO Forum was able to build a case for water reforms.
- 3. Use official sources to your advantage.**  
By getting government agencies to help research study data, the government could not then refute the findings.
- 4. Break through language barriers.**  
An important part of enabling the people of Kathmandu to get involved in the water debate was to translate key documents into Nepali.
- 5. Keep all stakeholders informed.**  
The NGO Forum continues to share its research findings through newsletters, websites, emails and community consultations and partnering with the media to reach the mass public.



This case study summarises the activities undertaken by the NGO Forum for Urban Water and Sanitation to improve public participation in decisions concerning water supply in Nepal's capital city Kathmandu. Between 1988 and 2007 government water policy focused on the construction of a water tunnel connecting the Melamchi Valley to the Kathmandu Valley. The NGO Forum argued the project would disproportionately benefit better off people and advocated for improvements to other water services that would benefit the urban poor.

WaterAid, 47-49 Durham Street,  
London, SE11 5JD, UK  
Tel: +44 (0)845 6000 433  
Email: [wateraid@wateraid.org](mailto:wateraid@wateraid.org)

**[www.wateraid.org](http://www.wateraid.org)**



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