



Villagers of Lapilang, Nepal, lead the way to where the new water tap is located. Photo credit: Colin H.P. Buckley, USAID

Keeping the Water Flowing

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When the citizens of Lapilang, a village in the northeastern region of Nepal, needed fresh drinking water, they would collect their buckets and set out on an hours long journey up a steep mountainside overlooking the foothills of the Himalayas.

Arduous and prone to danger from mudslides, the trip became necessary after the April 25, 2015, earthquake, which killed 9,000 people in Nepal. The devastation was followed by dozens of aftershocks that killed hundreds more while leveling buildings, rupturing pipes, destroying farmland and contaminating or shifting local water sources.

In spite of enormous logistical challenges, USAID and its partners mobilized in the following months to help villages like Lapilang. Last year, I went there as USAID staff to see if there had been any progress in returning their lives to normal.

What made USAID's work in Nepal unique was the use of "Community Driven Development." In this approach, an outside organization may offer to fund important small infrastructure projects, but it is up to community members themselves to identify, implement and maintain those projects. Instead of simply relying on outsiders to fund necessary improvements, the community will gain experience in democracy, local governance and demand greater accountability from leaders.

Fostering A Shared Vision

Reaching the village of about 4,000 Nepali citizens required several hours of driving through rocky and muddy terrain, flanked by precipitous mountains and terraced rice paddies.

When we arrived, word of our presence spread quickly — the small group of three to four people who greeted us with enthusiastic "namaste" quickly swelled to a couple dozen.

Invited into one of the town's small gathering rooms, we met with about 15 women and a half dozen men working with the project to inquire how the new water tap had changed their lives.

Many of the women said they can now drink straight from the tap — saving them the long journey to obtain and boil water for use. They now have time to dedicate to other activities, such as preparing food, cleaning and assisting their children with schoolwork. They recounted that it was more than hours saved — it was less time spent sick in bed from bacteria-infested water, fewer trips to distant hospitals, more time to tend to crop production and lives of loved ones saved.

The villagers further described how they are now raising funds to help the community maintain the water pipe through small monthly collections from each household. These could allow the water to keep flowing for 20 years or more. Not only will this hopefully lead the community to greater self sufficiency, but it will demonstrate the power of working together and developing a tax base to tackle big problems.

Building for the Future

This shared responsibility produced long term benefits beyond the provision of clean water. For instance, USAID used this program to work in collaboration with villagers to create community councils. As a condition of receiving the funds for water taps, these community councils were tasked with managing project timelines and presenting regular updates on town finances to the public.

Previously, many women felt excluded or dismissed when aiming to have a voice in the future of their community, but under these new USAID sponsored councils, both men and women were encouraged to join. They were also given equal say over distribution of village resources — a first for many women to have their voices heard on an important issue, which they said gave them confidence to take on increased responsibilities in the future.

This was only one small village of course, but USAID and its local partners have completed 90 similar community driven projects in Nepal, with almost as many more planned in the coming years. In villages such as Lapilang where USAID is working to provide water taps, citizens have taken great pride in their efforts to promote a more responsive and accountable government. And there is great hope that they will become even more self-reliant in the years to come.

From our conversations that day though, it was clear that at the very least, working toward a common goal was improving not just their access to clean water, but also their ability to work together in implementing a shared vision of the future.

We thanked them for their time and prepared for the long journey back to Kathmandu. Before giving our farewell, one of the religious elders offered us a traditional gift of fresh cucumber and smeared my forehead with a mixture of red tika and rice — a popular Nepali blessing. The warm gestures were greatly appreciated, and we left feeling both inspired by their collective success and hopeful for their future.

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