Key insights from ESPA’s Political Economy of Water Resources project and Governance synthesis

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Western Himalayas Case Study: overview

• ESPA-funded project: *Political Economy of Water Security, Ecosystem Services and Livelihoods in the Western Himalayas*

• Six small town case studies located through the Himalayas: Palampur and Rajgarh in Himachal Pradesh; Mussoorie and Nainital in Uttarakhand, India; and Bidur and Dhulikhel in Nepal.

• Examined the relationship between water supply and urbanisation.
The Context

• Growing awareness and research into forest-water relationships.
• Increasing stress points, multiple competing uses.
• Implications for SDGs, especially SDG 1 (poverty), 6 (clean water) and 15 (life land)
Trade-offs in the forest-water relationship

• Between alternative land uses
• Between material well-being and ecosystem services
• Between different uses of water within a watershed
• Between hydrologically connected upstream and downstream users of forests and water
• Within communities of both upstream and downstream users
Himalayas Case Study: Trade-offs

Between uses of water and land:

- Migration to small towns leads to increased demand for water (‘downstream’). Increased demand for water due to changes in upstream agriculture (Rajgarh, Himachal Pradesh).
- Building in upstream areas affecting town water supply in Nainital.

Between water users

- Increased conflict between rural and urban users, even where shared access agreements existed such as at Bidur and Dhulikhel.
- Increased demand in the summer months due to tourism.
Himalayas Case Study: RWAs

- An RWA agreement was implemented between three upstream hamlets and Palampur Municipal Council.
- Imposed land use and access restrictions on the forest area in exchange for a relatively small yearly payment.
- Difficulties in the maintenance of RWAs highlights power asymmetries within and between communities.
- Variation in the ability of downstream users to pay: Dhulikhel Water Users’ Committee in Nepal has agreed a progressive tariff structure.
Outcomes for Poverty Alleviation

- Social differentiation in access to services.
- Heterogeneity in both upstream and downstream communities—different levels of wealth and poverty.
- For schemes to benefit the poor, they must be included. Not always the case. Membership may be skewed towards the wealthier members of the community, and interventions may reinforce inequality.
Governance issues

- For local participation in governance to be meaningful, existing power dynamics across and within levels of governance need to be challenged.

- Importance of the political economy context: unequal power and dominance of existing interests.

- Informal institutions remain critical for ES governance; existing systems need to be considered when new interventions are proposed.

- Need to identify ‘critical water zones’ across these landscapes - locations which are identifiable as impacting the hydrological system, and where changes in the patterns of landuse can result in variations in hydrological regimes.

- Holistic approaches and deliberate design are important to serve the poor and alleviate poverty.