Empowered Community and Local Ownership:

The Hariyo Ban "Green Forest" Project

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Cover photo: Nepalese women spin yarn on the steps of the Monkey Temple in Kathmandu, Nepal (iStock)

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Executive Summary

In Nepal, climate-dependent agriculture is the predominant source of income for over 60 per cent of the population. Despite its minimal contribution to global greenhouse emissions, Nepal ranks fourth on the Global Climate Index 2020 for countries most affected by extreme weather events in the last 20 years. This vulnerability is exacerbated by social inequalities. Marginalized groups, including women, Dalits, and Janajatis, are most affected because of their socioeconomic standing and reliance on natural resources. Their limited access to resources and decision making diminishes their adaptive capacities.

To address these disparities, the Hariyo Ban "Green Forest" Program was established, emphasizing the interconnectedness of people, forests, and climate. The project stressed gender equality and social inclusion, governance, and livelihoods to further biodiversity conservation and climate adaptation. Hariyo Ban introduced community learning and action centres (CLACs) to empower marginalized groups, promote active community roles, and address climate change adaptation and disaster risk reduction.

Our research focuses on understanding the role and sustainability of the CLACs. After conducting a detailed review of Hariyo Ban's documentation and published reports, we carried out 10 days of field work in May 2023 in Kathmandu and Chitwan District, where we conducted interviews with stakeholders, project facilitators, local resource experts, and community members. We found that CLACs played a critical role in areas like awareness and sensitization, capacity building and empowerment, and representation and participation. CLACs were pivotal in raising awareness about women's and marginalized groups' rights and increased women's participation in forest user groups from 30 to 50 per cent. Their capacity-building and empowerment activities were central in transforming many illiterate community members into active participants — some even

became elected politicians. CLACs also assisted communities in creating local adaptation plans of action and disaster-risk-reduction plans, ensuring community ownership and the inclusion of local knowledge, which enhanced these plans' effectiveness.

Despite their many achievements, CLACs are concerned about the continuation and inclusivity of the initiatives, primarily as a result of sporadic monitoring after the project's conclusion and inconsistent funding. Other challenges include economic constraints, gender inequities, caste-based discrimination, frequent changes at the ministry level, and translating global climate knowledge to local contexts.

Drawing from these insights, we offer a set of recommendations and lessons for similar interventions. Future initiatives need consistent monitoring, robust exit strategies, and an emphasis on knowledge sharing between stakeholders. Prioritizing marginalized groups, localizing climate education, and offering viable alternatives when proposing resource shifts are crucial to achieve community support and mitigate resistance.

Context: Climate Change, Gender, and Caste in Nepal

Despite its minimal contribution to greenhouse gas emissions, Nepal was the fourth most impacted nation by extreme weather phenomena over the past two decades.[1] Situated at the crossroads of the Indo-Malayan and Palearctic biogeographic regions, Nepal's ecological diversity is vast ranging from the flat plains of the Terai in the south and the mid-hills in the centre to the towering mountains and desert plateaus in the north. These diverse micro-climates and localized ecosystems have shaped the country's socioeconomic strategies. More than half of the population (60.4%) relies on agriculture, forests, and fisheries for sustenance.[2] Climate-dependent agriculture stands as the primary income source for most people. However, recent trends have underscored the country's high susceptibility to the impacts of climate change with a rise in average annual temperatures, unpredictable monsoon patterns, and an increased frequency of extreme weather events.

This climate vulnerability is further exacerbated by existing social inequalities. Marginalized groups, including women, lower-caste and ethnic minorities like Dalits, and Janajatis (Indigenous ethnic groups in Nepal), are disproportionately affected because of social marginalization based on socioeconomic status, gender, caste, and dependence on natural resources for their livelihoods. The limited power and access to resources and decision making among marginalized communities further reduces their adaptive capacities.

Women, who constitute 73.6 per cent of the agricultural and natural resource management workforce in Nepal, are not just at the front line of experiencing climate change impacts but are also pivotal in driving mitigation efforts. However, a review of Nepal's climate change policies reveals a lack of gender awareness and a deficiency in gender considerations and detailed measures tailored for women. This lack of gender sensitivity in policies can further push the gender disparity caused by the impacts of climate change, especially for people living in poverty, people

1   Global Climate Risk Index 2020.

2   Aastha Bhusal, G.C. Sagar, and Laxman Khatri, "A Review Article on Role of Information and Communication Technology in Agriculture and Factors Affecting Its Dissemination in Nepal," *Journal of Applied Biotechnology and Bioengineering* 8, no. 3 (2021): 81–85.

facing caste discrimination, and people with disabilities.

Initiatives like the Hariyo Ban Program exemplify the potential of community-driven, inclusive approaches to conservation and climate change adaptation. By emphasizing the interconnectedness of people, forests, and climate, such programs aim to empower the most vulnerable, helping to advance the concept that people are not just passive recipients but active participants in the fight against climate change.

Our Research

Our research, in collaboration with Partnership for Sustainable Development Nepal, focused on understanding the role, sustainability, and influence of the community learning and action centres (CLACs) on the Hariyo Ban initiative. In our multi-methods strategy, we reviewed 20 grey literature documents and conducted 23 interviews with stakeholders, project facilitators, local resource experts, and community members. Most interviews were conducted in person in Kathmandu, Nepal. A few were conducted online over Zoom and one was conducted in Chitwan, Nepal. Most interviews were conducted in English, but when this was not possible our partner Mr. Bhatta and our research assistant Mr. Bhandari worked as translators. Most interviews were individual interviews, but there were a few group interviews. Most interviews lasted between 30 and 60 minutes.

About Hariyo Ban

The "Hariyo Ban" ("Green Forest") project, which ran from 2011 to 2021 in Nepal, was funded by the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) and implemented by organizations including the World Wide Fund for Nature (WWF), CARE Nepal, the National

Trust for Nature Conservation (NTNC), and the Federation of Community Forestry Users Nepal (FECOFUN). Collaborating with local entities, governmental institutions, NGOs, and the private sector, the initiative aimed to address the challenges posed by climate change, safeguard biodiversity, and empower communities, specifically in the Chitwan-Annapurna and Terai Arc regions. The project's strategy, cross-cutting with its various biodiversity and climate adaptation initiatives, emphasized gender empowerment and social inclusion (GESI) of marginalized communities. This means that GESI was considered in project planning, and implemented across different sites. Project implementations were wide ranging and varied depending on the region of work and on the implementing partner organizations, but overall included environmental adaptation, biodiversity, and GESI.

Environmental adaptation typically involved crafting and implementing local plans for climate adaptation and climate risk reduction, for example, building infrastructure such as flood protection and improving people's livelihood through income-generation activities (such as eco-tourism) to prevent overreliance on unsustainable practices and the overuse of natural resources. Attention to biodiversity involved the creation of anti-poaching groups and committees and other initiatives to monitor and protect endangered animals, for example, building forest barricades or campaigns to eradicate harmful practices such as field burning to prevent forest fires. GESI initiatives aims to empower women and marginalized groups and included the community learning and action centres (CLACs).

All three components involved awareness raising, working in community-led models, and cooperation with governments to implement and improve policies. Additionally, some activities were often complements and at the
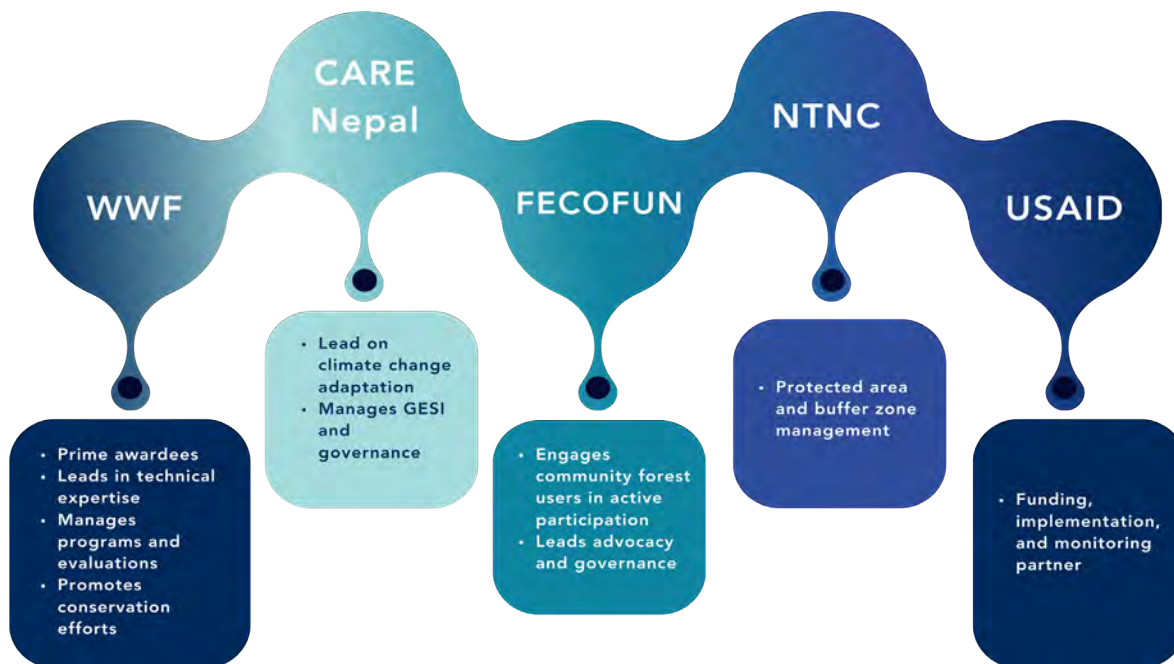
Figure 1. Summary of the collaborative network of the Hariyo Ban Program, highlighting the key roles and responsibilities of its partner

intersection of two or more pillars of the project implementations, and one locality or region might include many different initiatives. For example, we observed income generation through women-led artisan carpet production in Chitwan, which addressed both climate adaptation and gender empowerment.

CLACs were central to Hariyo Ban's GESI approach. Initiated in 2012, the CLACs are structured as community-centric models designed to bolster the roles of women and other marginalized groups in societal and governmental domains, which complemented the community participation in other Hariyo Ban initiatives on climate and biodiversity training sessions, facilitating participants in recognizing and rectifying community-specific challenges while also cultivating leadership attributes both at local and governmental levels. The CLACs' approach has subsequently influenced GESI and climate adaptation facets of Hariyo Ban, manifesting in tackling local issues such as menstrual taboos and child marriages, promoting women's participation in environmental leadership and resource

management roles, and forming networks against gender-based violence.

CLACs' implementors and staff first approached the community and recruited a facilitator or CLAC leaders, preferably from the community and the marginalized population or from nearby communities, who are educated and capable of facilitating discussions. These people were then trained for around six weeks before the establishment of the CLACs from targeted households, which they often took part in. CLACs began with a period of training and discussions of key GESI issues. Policy knowledge such as gender quotas in local governments and community resource groups, constitutional rights against discrimination, exclusion, and/or gendered violence, for instance, were part of the basic CLAC programming. However, apart from these important rights and legal protections, the learning and awareness program differed across CLACs based on local concerns, community members' interests, and the knowledge of the facilitator.

In general, the topics raised for discussions often included GESI issues such as rights and discrimination, gender-based violence, and forced and early marriages. Afterward, CLACs created their own action plans to rectify a problem that members identified in their community and served as a platform to carry out this plan. These plans could be in the forms of awareness or lobbying campaigns, discussions with the local government and community, and also relate to livelihood programs and access to resources such as land, water, forest management, and climate change and climate adaptation concerns.

From 2011 to 2016 (Phase I), 485 CLACs were established, and in the subsequent five years (Phase II) 34 additional CLACs were created. This second phase also introduced 64 post-CLAC support assemblies, with 61 pre-existing CLACs receiving enhanced support. This methodology emphasized further skill development in women and marginalized leaders, addressing GESI challenges and providing strategic backing for CLAC affiliates advocating for leadership and societal change. To ensure the continuation and

efficiency of the CLACs, a training-of-trainers (ToT) methodology facilitated seasoned trainers to instruct novice trainers, and promoted the project's sustainability.

Equally important were the climate adaptation and biodiversity components, which were both mainstreamed with GESI. In other words, the project was designed and the outcomes were evaluated with the goal of fostering the inclusion of women and the most marginalized. Climate change initiatives involved the joint creation and tailoring of the Local Adaptation Plan of Action or LAPA, a Nepalese policy for climate adaptation planning at the community level. It included work in disaster risk reduction and making community plans to respond to disaster scenarios. Throughout the planning process, communities were involved in group discussions and awareness-raising campaigns, enabling them to raise their concerns and express their priorities when it comes to climate risks and adaptation.

Projects were then executed in all aspects of climate adaptation, from livelihood programs generating income from organic or environmentally friendly farming practices
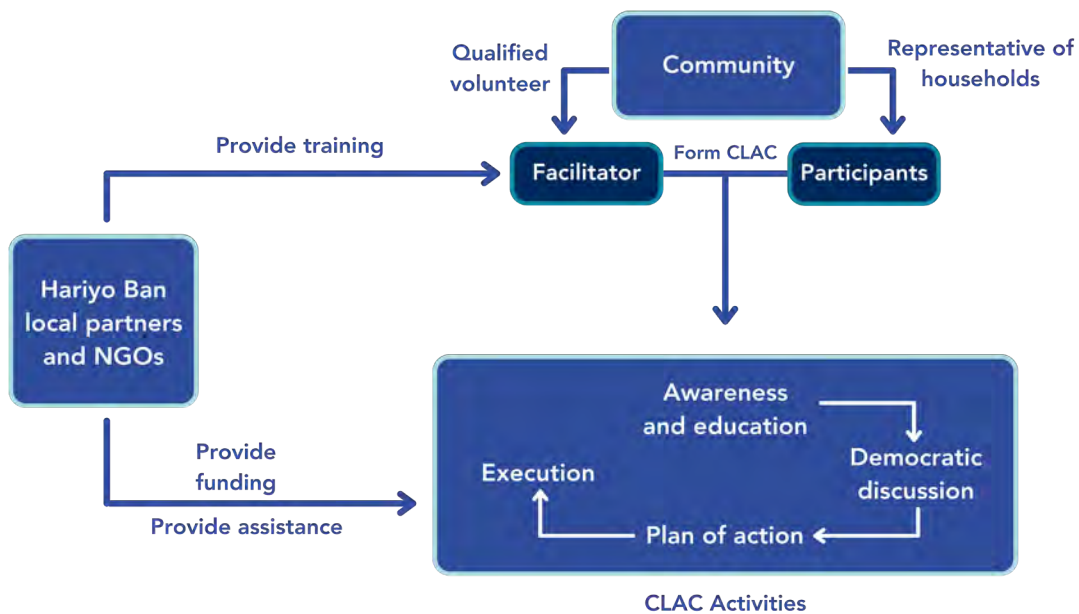

Figure 2. The components and methods of CLACs

to waste and watershed management. While biodiversity was not our focus, we learned that its implementation was also informed by GESI and the role of women and the most marginalized in managing forest resources and the forests' relations with wildlife. It included the same element of community discussion, awareness, and campaigns with a focus on the marginalized. Through community involvement, anti-poaching groups and committees were created. Climate and biodiversity initiatives were commonly carried out alongside some aspects of livelihood improvements or income generation, such as through farming programs and schemes to provide machinery and equipment for household production.

Considering Hariyo Ban's expansive impact and duration, the CLACs' contributions and the project's climate and biodiversity initiatives offer insights into women's empowerment and climate adaptation methodologies in Nepal. Delving into this can refine strategies targeting sustainable development goals 5 (gender equality), 10 (reduced inequalities), 11 (sustainable cities and communities), and 13 (climate action).

Hardest to Reach

The gender empowerment and social inclusion (GESI) component of Hariyo Ban was crafted with the intention of improving the lives of women and other marginalized people, namely people living in poverty, persons in the lower castes, and Indigenous and minority ethnic groups. Due to the cross-cutting nature of GESI in the Hariyo Ban project, these hardest-to-reach populations vary depending on the working areas — for example, in conservation areas — or in localities specifically targeted for community leanring and action centre (CLAC) projects and GESI-specific initiatives. In general, they are rural residents, sometimes in mountainous or more remote areas, with low income and little economic opportunities, high dependency on natural resources, and thus vulnerability to climate change and climate disasters. Most importantly, the most marginalized are often women and those from the lower castes, who often suffer from gender, ethnic, or caste-based oppression and inequality. However, the nature of Nepalese society in any region includes heterogeneity in gender, caste, class, and ethnic groups.

The broad nature of the project meant that certain populations have different vulnerabilities and risks, so they were targeted with different approaches based on their interests, issues, and marginalizations. For example, many women recipients and participants in the CLACs had often not completed primary education and/or lacked the ability to communicate and articulate themselves in group discussions because of inequitable gender norms that result in social confinement to their household and the work burden of caring for families. Coupled with a traditional patriarchal social attitude common in the rural areas in which men often dominate decision making, women frequently need to ask for permission from their husbands and family to participate in public activities, and in turn, many were unable to realize or become aware of their rights, or raise issues affecting them such as gender-based violence.

Despite the progressive gender quotas and inclusive GESI policies mandating the representation of women and marginalized groups at all levels of government and some community bodies (such as forest and land user groups), monitoring, implementation, and awareness about these policies remain a challenge, resulting in a lack of diversity and representation for the most marginalized in decision-making positions. Even when representations of these groups follow or exceed the quotas, lack of awareness and power dynamics still hinder effective representation of their needs and opinions.

Caste

The caste system in Nepal originated as a rigid, hereditary, hierarchical system based on religious and cultural elements that categorize and dictate people's occupation, and severely limit the relationship between different castes, through distinct social norms and rituals. The lower castes are often deemed "impure," and those such as Dalits are deemed "untouchable" — prohibited from marrying or even sharing meals with members of the upper castes, among many other prohibitions. While the caste system has been abolished legally and many policies and constitutional protections exist to prevent discrimination and exclusion based on caste, oppression based on caste remains pervasive. This is especially true in rural areas and more remote places where the tradition of caste is an integral part of cultural norms and values. Lower-caste groups, and similarly Indigenous groups and ethnic minorities, often can't own land or resources and are excluded from decision making in resource user groups. These groups often require some level of resource ownership or government documentation that the lower-caste members do not have, or that they find very difficult to acquire. Women from lower castes also experience gender inequality and discrimination differently than women from higher castes.

When it comes to climate change impacts, women and marginalized groups are at the most risk during climate disasters and face the highest degree of impact, especially given the remoteness and geography of some areas. Local governments either had not developed local adaptation plans of action (LAPAs) — Nepal's original country-wide climate change strategy — or have not mainstreamed GESI, meaning they have not made plans inclusive of the marginalized groups. Although communities were well aware of changes in their environment and climate, they lacked awareness of the causes and solutions regarding climate change, or most importantly, of

their rights and roles in creating LAPAs. Crucially, many low-income and poor community members have relied on practices that are unsustainable and ecologically destructive, such as poaching, to meet survival needs.

Success

Because of their long duration, wide scope, and extensive collaboration and delegation of project implementation to partners, the Hariyo Ban project interventions were diverse. However, we focused on gender equality and social inclusion (GESI) and climate adaptation, and divided the implementation into the cross-cutting GESI component, the CLACs (community learning and action centres), and climate change and biodiversity components.

Cross-cutting GESI Component

When evaluating the cross-cutting GESI actions, we were interested in project interventions and implementations that incorporated elements of GESI into other aspects, such as livelihood, climate risk reductions, and biodiversity, excluding the implementation of the CLACs. The goal was to make every policy, documentation, or action from the project, regardless of whether it was GESI-focused, inclusive of women and other marginalized groups.

The Hariyo Ban project helped to mainstream GESI in Nepal through its interactions with its partners and its project implementation process. At the federal and ministry government level, through the project's close collaboration with the ministries and the government, GESI practices were promoted through policy crafting and capacity building, sensitization meetings, technical support, and discussions of the project roles, scope, and funding. Similarly, local governments also adopted more GESI-friendly practices, especially with the joint crafting of

LAPAs (local adaptation and plan of action) and disaster risk reduction plans, and direct involvement with Hariyo Ban in the community and implementations.

Within other partners like civil society organizations, NGOs, and community resource user groups, GESI also became mainstreamed for the same reasons. Many groups adopted and adapted the ideas and implementation methodology of GESI from Hariyo Ban in other projects. One example involves the national community forest user group FECOFUN (Federation of Community Forest Users Nepal), which was a crucial partner in the program that connected grassroots forest user groups with Hariyo Ban and collaborated with other organizations to implement all three components of the project. They had been developing plans for a 25-year roadmap spotlighting issues such as gender-based violence and aim to scale up their GESI work that was implemented during Hariyo Ban. This influence had also reached staff and organizers in the NGO sector who may not have worked on the project, but went on to incorporate lessons learned from it, specifically the CLACs and GESI component, into their work.

Without close consideration of GESI, implementations risk the unintended consequence of exacerbating existing inequalities and excluding the most vulnerable from the benefits of development projects. For example, one GESI leader we interviewed from a water system project mentioned a livelihood project targeting women to use water to grow organic vegetables. This reinforces women's traditional association with vegetable farming as opposed to men's grain and cereal farming, and further confines them to the homestead. Having GESI mainstreamed in policies, plans, and implementations thus helped to improve the outcomes of the Hariyo Ban project and avoid these unintended consequences. In addition, a community-based model in which implementations were developed by — or with the input of — beneficiaries ensured that initiatives serve the communities' interests. Interviewees mostly reported more participation from women and marginalized groups — a better reach to improve their conditions and incorporate their concerns into the plans. This is consistent with the Hariyo Ban reports.

The cross-cutting GESI component also involves capacity building, and empowerment within the context of all initiatives, to promote more inclusive community decisions and more involvement from the most marginalized in their community and local politics. Several interviewees noted that women-dominated groups — including CLACs but also resource user groups, cooperatives, or income-generation groups such as weavers or farmers — tend to perform better than their male counterparts or mixed-gender groups. Some explained this by referring to women's role in resource management for their households, their vulnerability to climate change, and their lack of partisan political conflict, relative to the men. Most interviewees noted that involvement in the initiatives often empowered women and marginalized groups to participate in other projects, in local concerns, or politics. This effect was especially noted within the CLACs, but was also seen within the staff for the Hariyo Ban project. Several facilitators and local resource people mentioned that working for Hariyo Ban was the first time they had encountered GESI ideas and implementations, and shared that the process also empowered them to be more confident and to participate in more GESI work.

CLACs' Components

The CLACs were generally successful in sensitizing about and increasing awareness of the rights of women and the marginalized. In a majority of CLACs, there were increased awareness and knowledge about the various aspects of specific issues discussed. For example, an award-winning CLAC focusing on menstrual

Figure 3. Women from local weaving collective participating in a skill-development workshop, supported by Hariyo Ban's livelihood diversification initiatives.

taboo and stigma, specifically the removal and isolation of menstruating women and girls from the household during their periods, successfully persuaded the community away from the practice by sharing knowledge. Beyond discussions with the community regarding women's rights, the discussions about health and about the harms done by the practice sensitized the community thanks to a few knowledgeable members, with the help of the project.

Alongside awareness was the capacity building and empowerment of the members, and in some instances the local community, through the CLACs' action plans and collaboration with other Hariyo Ban initiatives. Both the reports and the

interviews mentioned examples of many members of the CLACs who were transformed from being unable to read or write, or unable to introduce themselves and conduct meetings, to being able to hold and join discussions and participate in their community to a greater extent. This empowerment also influenced women's and other marginalized groups' participation in politics and community decision making. In a few exceptional cases, CLAC members changed careers from housewives to elected politicians, participated in international forums to speak about the lessons learned, and visited India to learn about gender empowerment work there.

The impact of increased awareness and empowerment resulted in the much greater representation of women and the marginalized in their community. For instance, in forest user groups the representation of women increased from 30 to 50 per cent.[3] The evidence from both internal reports and our interviews suggests that cross-cutting elements of GESI improved outcomes of other non-GESI initiatives, and that empowering and including the most vulnerable may be beneficial for other project implementations. Interviewees highlighted that most of the successful CLACs had plans of actions that improve livelihood and generate income, protect biodiversity, or fulfill some other components of the project aim, in which the capacity built from the CLACs was leveraged for success.

Overall, the success and sustainability of the CLACs varied, and different interviewees gave different narratives and examples. Official reports from Hariyo Ban did not collect any data on the CLACs after the project ended, so our interviews with the stakeholders represent the only sustainability evaluation. Due to the lack of a monitoring mechanism and a systematic follow-up process, it is difficult to determine the actual number of operating CLACs and their

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3   "Final Technical Report of the Hariyo Ban Program, Phase II," Hariyo Ban Program, Kathmandu, Nepal, WWF Nepal, 2021.

status. Additionally, given the diversity of CLACs' actions, it is difficult to gauge the "success" in nonmeasurable components such as the impact on attitude or discrimination.

It seems that most CLACs were able to carry out the full programming and awareness raising with adequate participation from the targeted group, and a majority of CLACs progressed with or completed their plans of action and even created new plans of action to address community issues. Interviewees agreed that the impact of the social transformation created by the CLACs results in a more inclusive environment, less discrimination, and better policies to address GESI concerns in the community. To a general extent, community empowerment led to the pursuit of other non-GESI initiatives, at least during and immediately after the project implementation.

Most facilitators and staff members believed that a majority of the CLACs stopped meeting and functioning as CLACs after the project finished, mainly because of the lack of funding and the difficulty of finding time and resources for organizing continuous discussions and making action plans. In that sense, the awareness and education component, as well as the GESI social transformation based on community discussion, were not continued. However, there were quite a few exceptions where the CLACs continued under a different name and perhaps slightly different implementation while keeping the same model, especially in the regions where the civil society groups continue their operation under different projects.

A significant number of CLACs were able to continue and be sustained in different forms without support from project partners. We encountered many examples of finance cooperatives, enterprises, community resource groups, and civil society and activist groups that were formerly CLACs, or were the result of CLAC actions. They were able to sustain the positive impact of empowerment, and depending on the groups and the needs of the members, they

continued the impact in GESI, livelihoods and income generation, and climate adaptation.

Figure 4. Observation tower at the edge of a community forest managed under the Hariyo Ban program, used for monitoring wildlife and forest health.

Climate and Biodiversity Components

Hariyo Ban successfully improved people's awareness of climate change, climate adaptation, conservation work, and change in community practices. Communities were engaged in the development of new inclusive local adaptation plans of action (LAPAs) and disaster risk reduction plans, or in making revisions to improve inclusivity and reflect the existing GESI policies and frameworks of Nepal. Through this process, capacity and policy knowledge were cultivated at the local level. The LAPAs involved and fostered ownership for the community members, while simultaneously improving awareness and leveraging local knowledge about the specific

vulnerabilities that they and their environment face, which aids in the LAPAs' effective implementation.

Changes in behaviour and practices, such as preventing poaching, protecting important wild animals from hunting, preventing forest fire, and stopping littering were mentioned with many successful examples. The dual integrated nature of biodiversity and climate change work with livelihoods and income generation means that there was a positive impact on the material well-being of community members. For example, a community we visited in Chitwan had bio-gas plants built as an alternative solution to burning wood for fuel and as a solution to waste management, which allowed them a cleaner, more sustainable source of energy to use for domestic and economic activities.

Sustainability varied with the kind of initiatives. Most of the conservation and biodiversity work, and a significant number of climate adaptation, income generation, and livelihood activities, were carried out by the National Trust for Nature Conservation (NTNC), and the Federation of Community Forestry Users Nepal (FECOFUN), which continues to sustain them within their own organization. The NTNC, for example, monitors many such initiatives, especially conservation, and continues to develop new projects. In this way monitoring and technical assistance and expertise were offered when needed to sustain the impact. Other communities sustained themselves with the transition and support from the local government, which was a major partner in devising, funding, and implementing the LAPAs with Hariyo Ban. Some initiatives, especially entrepreneurial projects from individual households' farms or community cooperatives, were able to be self-sustaining.

Barriers to Success

Despite the project's successful stories, there were significant barriers to achieving sustainability and implementing a project truly inclusive of women and the most marginalized. Some barriers applied to the implementation of many project components, while others are more specific to particular parts of the project.

General Barriers

It is unclear how sustainable many initiatives were because there was no monitoring after the project ended. This was especially true for community learning and action centres (CLACs). Monitoring and knowledge of ongoing project impacts rely on the work and presence of individual staff and coordinators, which is unequal across geographical areas, partner organizations, and types of implementations. The inconsistency regarding different CLACs' or initiatives' sustainability also mirrors the inconsistent description of, or lack of, an exit strategy. Interviewees described different degrees of planning for an exit strategy when asked about their area of work. While some pointed to a plan to transition the implementation to local governments or civil society groups, others had little planning for the fate of the implementations after the project ended. This lack of planning contributed negatively to project sustainability.

Local governments were often the key stakeholders identified for the handover of projects as a result of their constant presence in the area, their authority, and their resources. However, a few barriers prevented local governments from taking over. For example, they may not have enough resources or capacity to sustain the project. This includes a lack of legal and technical knowledge, and constraints on funding that prevent them from maintaining the staff and "experts" hired by the project. One interviewee mentioned the difficulty of maintaining

the solar panel systems they installed during Hariyo Ban, stating that they had no technicians around to fix or maintain the infrastructure once the project had ended. This lack of capacity coincides with a lack of incentives in some cases.

Despite training and capacity building for local government being a component of the project, some local governments were not very involved in the implementation or monitoring of the project initiatives and performed only a funding and policy role. As one facilitator described, they may show up to the opening ceremonies but may not be receptive to CLAC discussions and implementations of action plans. Lack of involvement during implementation may impede the building of capacity, and ultimately the successful transfer of project monitoring and implementation to local governments to sustain it.

Other means of sustaining CLACs can involve continuing work by partnering NGOs or civil society groups, and the self-funding and sustaining by community members. Both are constrained by a lack of funding and limited access to funding sources, without which it becomes very difficult to incentivize or compensate the most marginalized members for their participation. As a Hariyo Ban leader described: "There are people who are dependent on daily wages — if they come to a workshop [for the] whole day … they [still] have to feed their kids and family … In that case you have to pay an amount, at least for them to make their daily expenses." Without this funding, it is difficult to sustain the CLACs because participants face economic burdens.

Poverty and unequal access to resources for the most marginalized also pose a structural barrier to the project's success, mainly in preventing these groups from participating in project activities. For women, time poverty — the lack of time available for them free from domestic responsibility and necessary economic activities — is very prevalent. It prevented some from joining community discussions or action plans, despite

the snack money provided to make up for their expenses and lost time. Similarly, landlessness and lack of documentation may prevent the poorest, who are disproportionately the lower castes and Indigenous groups, from acquiring memberships in resource user groups and bar them from empowerment and decision making. Speaking on structural barriers, an expert in GESI and development in Nepal said, "there are so many structural challenges. Time constraints for women or time constraints for the poor people, due to other issues like education, access, all the fundamental political economic challenge of these particular groups."

The issue of class and socioeconomic status is intertwined with caste-based discrimination and elite capture — that is, when organizations with decision-making power fail to represent the interests of the marginalized because of an overrepresentation of the privileged and people from upper castes. In less successful cases, the domination of the upper castes both within and outside the CLACs may frustrate their activities. CLACs made up entirely of marginalized and lower-caste women may face disapproval and discrimination from the wider community or lack of interest from local governments, where decision making is often in the hands of the upper castes. This inequality also created conflicts within CLACs and community groups, or even conflicts between communities with implementing partner organizations. Interviewees from both the upper and lower castes recounted examples of such conflicts resulting in the closure of a few CLACs.

In many regions, caste and gender discrimination were entrenched in local customs and cultural norms, values, and expectations, which posed a challenge for project implementation. One GESI staff member recounted the difficulties of gaining trust in Muslim communities, citing the strict adherence to religious beliefs and norms as a tall barrier that ultimately makes

GESI implementations in these villages quite unsuccessful.

Thus, despite improvements and successes, discrimination and/or a lack of inclusion persist, especially in informal ways. For example, a community may realize the need to include marginalized members in decision-making and community activities, but may still practise forms of caste-based discrimination. Describing the issue of caste-based discrimination against the lower-caste Dalit people, one staff member explained:

> [In a] Dalit family … she [the woman] is facing two types of discrimination — one is [discrimination against] women, another is caste discrimination. So if something [like] rape [or] harassment [happens], people don't think [about] that. Caste doesn't matter at that time, but when [it comes to things] like giving respect, or having food together, they feel "oh, she's Dalit."

While Hariyo Ban's CLACs primarily employed a "rights-based approach" targeting people with the same vulnerability, and thus prioritizing CLACs of the most marginalized to empower them, some CLACs' members have significant differences in their caste and class backgrounds. Mixed-group CLACs may see the lower castes' concerns sidelined by women with higher status, which can disincentivize the former's participation. Different groups often have different priorities, leading to conflict over implementation of the action plan or support for certain initiatives. Commenting on this point, a project coordinator said: "so many thoughts came together and there are conflicts [that] certainly occur, because some people want to go through the infrastructure development only, some people want to go through social transformation only. Some want to go through the other factors only." Lower-caste members are often landless and poorer. Interviewees mentioned that this further restrained their ability to participate in empowerment activities and

presented another rift between them and the wider community.

The close collaboration with the government at all levels, a key factor for success, was hindered by frequent changes in personnel at the ministry level. The country's modern government system features frequent turnover in political positions — which Hariyo Ban's staff have adapted to. Since this turnover occurs only at the federal level, most implementations at the local scale do not face this issue. However, many Hariyo Ban staff members commented that poor transition between personnel impedes smooth collaboration and policy coordination, leading to the need to constantly reintroduce the project to new ministers and civil servants.

The wide collaboration between different NGOs, civil society groups, local governments, and community groups poses a coordination challenge, which explains some inconsistency in the perception of how successful the CLACs were. While different partners may have different specialties, better coordination would allow the strengths and lessons learned from one partner to benefit others. Coordination across partner organizations was a key part of Hariyo Ban, for example, with CARE Nepal's provision of GESI expertise and analysis, and for the most part collaboration seems well managed. However, challenges of coordination at the local level, and especially over the exit plan and transition of the initiatives after project duration, caused disruptions.

Cross-cutting Gender Empowerment and Social Inclusion

While most interviewees emphasize the importance of GESI practices across implementations, a GESI and governance staff member spoke of a lack of priority for GESI funding and active representation. They lamented

the weakness in GESI knowledge and skills in some staff and raised the need to appoint a focal person to ensure responsibility for GESI in a working team. Another interviewee identified the "focal person" practice as potentially limiting GESI work by relieving responsibility for understanding and awareness from other staff and focusing it on only one person. They identified the risk of only having a "focal person" for the sake of representation, without substantive change in making GESI-informed decisions by the remainder of staff. In this regard, the relative novelty of GESI knowledge and implementation to partners at the beginning of the project represents a barrier that requires constant education and improvement in skills to overcome.

Climate and Biodiversity Components

A key barrier for the project's climate adaptation and biodiversity component is a lack of knowledge and the need to make climate adaptation and climate change knowledge tailored to the local context. The communities and local governments in the implementation area, and marginalized communities in particular, may lack education and technical knowledge regarding climate change and climate adaptation. Moreover, the knowledge used to share climate-related findings may seem very global, abstract, and unrelated to the real-life issues important to them, such as land use and forest use. While it is important for communities to understand the international issues and big-picture causes of climate change, without localizing these issues, they may be not engage or translate that knowledge into localized action.

Given that marginalized communities are often resource dependent, efforts to change resource use and environmental practices without offering economically sound alternatives won't be met with much uptake or enthusiasm. The most immediate concerns of marginalized communities

centre on livelihood, and thus the ability to adapt and improve their living conditions given the changing climate. Implementation considerations targeting factors such as water and soil protection, seeds for planting crops more resistant to climate change, or improving health and hygiene, may therefore be more relevant and receive more engagement. According to one Hariyo Ban staff member:

> It boils down into a couple of things, rather than talking about the whole planet. That really doesn't make much sense in [the community members'] everyday life at the grassroots level … They need water protection, they need soil protection, they need vegetation for different purposes, and of course they need food and health. On top of everything they need money. Anything and everything that supports for these kind of things — there's a huge participation from the population.

Starting with the most important factors to survival, such as livelihood, and incorporating awareness and education could allow for participants' interests and goals to be aligned with the education and awareness they need to adapt to climate change. This alignment is necessary for knowledge translation to be meaningful and relevant, and thus taken into practice. We heard from a development project leader about how preventing littering and promoting recycling was much more successful when there was a financial incentive for people to turn in plastic bottles and metal cans, which also promoted knowledge about recycling. A Hariyo Ban staff member recalled that organic farming was promoted as an income-generation opportunity, which drove enthusiasm from the community to learn about environmentally friendly farming practices.

Several interviewees raised knowledge translation and exchange that needs to be localized

and adapted to the livelihood and income generation needs of the community. The lack of knowledge and skills relating to the creation and implementation of the LAPAs and disaster risk reduction may also be hard to fill with only "experts" from outside the community, without consulting and considering local knowledge about the effects of climate change in their area. Some interviewees mentioned that outsider "experts" sometimes prove less well-versed in the local climate-change effects and were occasionally viewed with skepticism. They added that local communities understand the changes in their own environment and have observed changes in their livelihood and living conditions as a result, even if they don't always connect it to climate change and CO2 emissions. In short, raising awareness about climate change to implement climate adaptation faces challenges when the knowledge is not connected and corroborated with the local context, local understanding, and local economic needs.

Lessons Learned

In analyzing the Hariyo Ban Project's cross-cutting gender equality and social inclusion (GESI) strategies, we paid particular attention to the implementation and impact of the community learning and action centres (CLACs), given their central role in improving internal governance within forest-user groups, developing the capacity of the poor, vulnerable, and socially excluded in Nepal to discuss and address their social, economic, and political challenges, and in promoting the project's climate and biodiversity components. Several key themes emerged from our interviews regarding what contributed to the success of the CLACs and the GESI strategy within Hariyo Ban. These discussions also offered critical insights into challenges faced and strategies to address barriers in future projects.

Collaboration, Integration, and Trust

Hariyo Ban demonstrated the significance of robust collaborations across diverse sectors. One of the foundational elements of its design were the partnerships and collaborations it formed with stakeholders, including grassroots communities, local and federal government agencies, international nonprofits, civil society organizations, as well as the private sector. This integrative approach enabled the establishment of key community-based and landscape-level interventions. For instance, Hariyo Ban drew from past initiatives in Nepal by strengthening three community-based tools, namely participatory governance assessment, participatory well-being ranking, and public hearing and public auditing. These tools were designed by CARE Nepal in the USAID-funded Strengthened Actions for Governance in Utilization of Natural Resource (SAGUN) Program, and served the dual purpose of enhancing internal governance of natural resource management groups and identifying the most vulnerable sectors of communities for focused interventions.

Haryo Ban strengthened these tools by leveraging the CLACs to deliver key governance-mechanisms skills training to the hardest-to-reach communities. This enabled these target communities to actively participate in the implementation of the Community Forestry Development Guidelines — directives issued by the government to streamline and standardize the management and utilization of forest resources to ensure sustainable practices and equitable distribution of benefits. This multisectoral partnership approach helped Hariyo Ban meet some of its key goals of reducing threats to target landscapes and promoting equitable access to and benefit sharing from natural resources for women and marginalized groups. This is reflected by a:

• 50 per cent increase in the number of people participating in sustainable natural resource management/biodiversity conservation between 2016 and 2021.

• 130 per cent increase in benefits received by women and members of ethnic and marginalized groups from natural resource management and adaptation interventions (aggregate income/revenue) between 2016and 2021.

• 260 per cent increase in the number of hectares of biologically significant areas under improved natural resource management between 2016 and 2021.

By building on the foundation of past initiatives, harnessing CARE's decades-long experience in biodiversity and governance promotion in Nepal, and strategically utilizing USAID's funding, Hariyo Ban succeeded in integrating its initiatives to support core government directives, resulting in the effective implementation and enforcement of the Community Forestry Development Guidelines. By leveraging the CLACs and FECOFUN's vast network Hariyo Ban further ensured that localized knowledge, resources, and governance mechanisms reached the most remote communities and positioned FECOFUN to sustain sound governance outcomes in natural resource management groups after the project finished.

Ownership in Governance and Planning

The principle of community ownership and its correlation with the sustainability of environmental and social initiatives is strikingly evident in the case of Hariyo Ban. The program sought to methodically integrate community involvement in all of its phases from development to execution. One notable strategy it employed is the co-creation of business plans and periodic reviews with community members facilitated through the CLACs. This methodology sought to instill a sense of ownership among the CLACs' participants and ensure the continued relevance and effectiveness of Hariyo Ban initiatives. For example, the involvement of local governments and community members in the Annapurna region in the systemic process of assessing the impacts of climate change and other environmental challenges has reportedly been a major contributor in mainstreaming, integrating, and leveraging resources for watershed, climate change adaptation (CCA), and disaster risk reduction (DDR) efforts in this region. In this example of the Annapurna Conservation Area Project (ACAP), the community participants not only aided in the successful implementation of interventions like power fencing but also motivated communities to leverage additional funds for scaling up such initiatives. This participatory approach extended to the planning processes of Integrated Solid Waste Management Plans (ISWMPs) and Local Adaptation Plans of Action (LAPAs), where the involvement of diverse community groups led to the development of a common understanding and ownership of these plans as reported in some of our forest community group leaders interviews.

Addressing Differential Impacts and Enhancing Participation through Innovative Approaches

The acknowledgement and assessment of differential impacts in environmental and social interventions is crucial. This principle led to the development of the Differential Impact Assessment and Responses Planning (DIA-RP) by CARE Nepal in the Hariyo Ban Program. This framework is designed for a systemic evaluation of the diverse impacts and their root causes while planning effective adaptation measures in an inclusive manner. Applying this approach, seven LAPAs were not only updated but also effectively implemented, showcasing the practical utility of this framework.
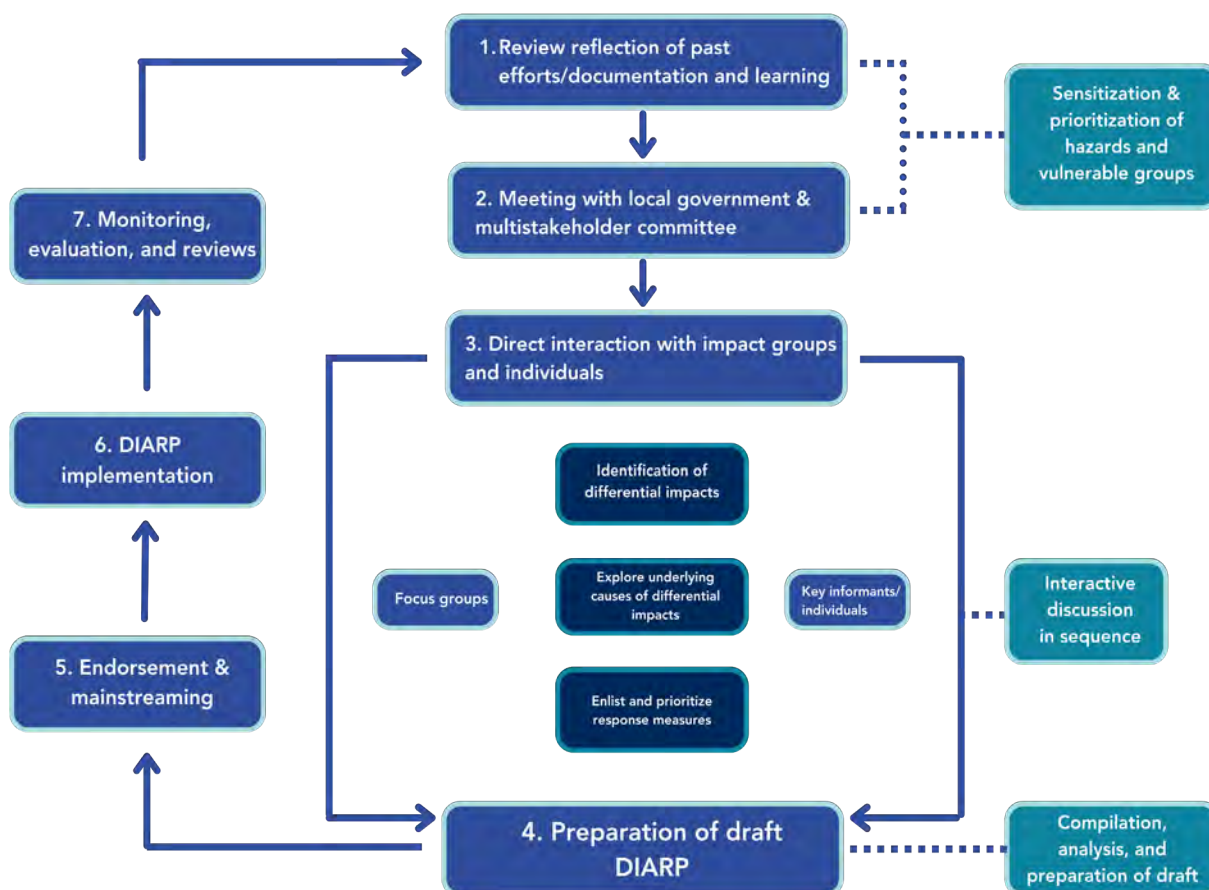
Figure 5. Flowchart of the Differential Impact Assessment and Response Planning (DIARP) Framework: A Sequential Approach to Identifying, Analyzing, and Addressing Varied Community Impact [4]

Strategies for Reducing Social Disparities

A significant stride in addressing these disparities comes through the Three-Gaps Model, which focuses on mitigating poverty by fostering market-based enterprises. This model is integral to the Hariyo Ban strategy to decrease biodiversity threats and climate vulnerabilities in Nepal. By providing marginalized, forest-dependent communities with alternative livelihood opportunities and necessary skill training achieved primarily through the CLACs, the program successfully enhanced employment prospects. This intervention led to increased incomes and reduced dependence on forest resources, illustrating a tangible impact on reducing poverty and promoting sustainable practices**.**

Promoting GESI-Friendly Technology

Another key area of focus in these frameworks is the promotion of gender equality and social inclusion (GESI)-friendly technology. In the context of the Integrated Solid Waste Management Plans (ISWMPs), a dedicated thematic area encompasses adaptive livelihood, GESI, and governance, with a notable allocation

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4   Bal Krishna Jamarkattel, Sabitra Dhakal, Jagannath Joshi, Dev Raj Gautam, and Sandesh Singh Hama, "Responding to Differential Impacts: Lessons from Hariyo Ban Program in Nepal," CARE Nepal, Hariyo Ban Program, 2019. 🔗

of 10 per cent of the total ISWMP implementation budget. This funding facilitates activities like the promotion of GESI-friendly technology, specifically targeting poor, women, Dalit, and marginalized groups.

The effectiveness of such interventions, however, is closely linked to the presence and engagement of technically skilled staff. For instance, in the Baunnelek Community Forest User Group (CFUG), the positioning of technical staff led to a more successful demonstration and adoption of climate-smart, time-saving, GESI-friendly tools and technologies compared to the Tunibhanjyang CFUG, where such support was absent. Yet, in places like Faramtole of Banke, trained farmers showed proficiency in utilizing these tools without needing regular assistance. This highlights the adaptability and self-sufficiency that can be achieved with proper training and resources.

Capacity Building and Empowering the Hardest to Reach

A core aspect of the program was the capacity building of local officials and engaging policymakers. This strategic approach was vital for aligning the scale of ecological processes with the operational levels of government entities, which typically function at the district, provincial, and municipal levels. By equipping local leaders and policymakers with the necessary tools and knowledge, the program successfully mitigated the discrepancies between these different scales.

As highlighted earlier, the CLACs supported small and medium-scale enterprises, prioritizing those that required low investment but promised quick financial returns. This strategy aimed at tackling the economic challenges linked to environmental preservation. Moreover, the program facilitated the development of medium-scale enterprises by adding value at the community level, thereby

generating local job opportunities and fostering economic growth within these communities.

Addressing Gender-Based Violence and Enhancing Institutional Accountability

A key element of the program's strategy focused on combatting gender-based violence (GBV) and emphasizing the accountability of institutions. Establishing subcommittees dedicated to gender equality and social inclusion (GESI) and committees against GBV led to a notable decrease in reports of GBV within communities. While an evaluation of this finding has not yet been conducted, our interviews with local participants reflect a perceived benefit from such programming. By adopting similar innovative approaches, future initiatives can replicate and build on the successful model of the Hariyo Ban program.

Monitoring and Policy Development: A Collaborative Approach

Central to Hairyo Ban's strategy was the collaborative support extended to the government of Nepal and civil society organizations, which was crucial in crafting pragmatic policies. This process of policy formation, exemplified by the development of the National Forest Policy, was rooted in a participatory methodology where stakeholders were involved from the onset. Lessons and best practices were meticulously documented, ensuring their seamless integration into these policies. The program faced challenges, notably in the prolonged policy development and approval processes, which sometimes impeded timely implementation. Despite these hurdles, the initiative made significant strides in promoting GESI within community natural resource management groups, notably through

the establishment of internal GESI policies and designating GESI focal points.

Exit Strategies and Ensuring Long-Term Sustainability

The program's design was informed by the foresight for planning exit strategies. The ten-year duration of Hariyo Ban, while beneficial for establishing long-term partnerships, highlighted the need for a more concentrated baseline for documenting landscape-level changes. The sustainability of the projects was further reinforced through external monitoring by entities such as cooperatives or local governments, ensuring continuity beyond the primary intervention period. The integration of lessons learned from the program's first phase into the subsequent phase highlights the significance of iterative learning and adaptive program planning.

Building Resilience through Synergistic Efforts

The interconnectedness of various program components played a critical role in achieving robust and resilient outcomes. This synergy ensured that the solutions were comprehensive, addressing a wide range of environmental and social challenges. The program's ability to integrate these different approaches into a cohesive strategy was instrumental in its overall success.

Recommendations for Future Projects

1. Strategic Collaboration and Partnerships

- **Governmental collaboration.** Foster sustained and structured collaboration with relevant governmental agencies to align project goals with existing state frameworks, and to ensure smoother implementation and wider acceptance.

- **Interdisciplinary partnerships.** Adopt a holistic, multidisciplinary approach by integrating expertise from diverse sectors such as community development and ecological intervention. This promotes a comprehensive understanding of regional socioeconomic and environmental challenges.

2. Community Engagement and Relationship Building

- **Prioritize community involvement.** Engage communities from the project onset in design, planning, and monitoring to foster ownership and ensure that interventions are sustainable.

- **Build and maintain trust.** Establish and maintain strong relationships with local communities. Use past successful engagements to streamline participation and enhance intervention effectiveness.

- **Tailor interventions to community needs.** Customize strategies to meet each community's unique needs and conditions, ensuring relevance and efficacy.

3. Project Development and Implementation

- **Draw on past successes.** Reiterate and refine successful strategies from previous programs, adapting them to current contexts without reinventing the wheel.

- **Local government participation.** Involve local governments in all project stages, aligning with local priorities to enhance the likelihood of successful implementation.

4. Scalability and Continuous Improvement

- **Focus on scalability and network expansion.** Support the growth of community groups into broader networks for extended benefits, ensuring community-led expansions with organizational support for larger impact.

- **Collaborative review and adaptation.** Conduct periodic reviews of plans and strategies with community input, ensuring that interventions remain relevant and providing opportunities for scaling successful strategies.

Research Team

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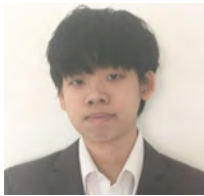
Diep Minh Nguyen is a BA candidate in economics for management and political science at the University of Toronto Scarborough, and an international student from Vietnam. With a keen interest in the labour market and heterodox economic theories, he previously worked for the university paper, *The Varsity*, where he wrote for the business and labour section. He was an avid participant in Model United Nations and debating, and is currently a member of the Hart House Debate Club. His prior experience with secondary qualitative research includes completing the extended project qualifications in the United Kingdom on "post-scarcity" economic theory and delivering a winning case study analyzing the effects of Vietnam's COVID-19 relief policy on informal women workers.

Carmen Logie joined the Factor-Inwentash Faculty of Social Work in 2013 as an assistant professor and is currently an associate professor. She is an adjunct scientist at the Women's College Research Institute, an adjunct professor, United Nations University Institute for Water, Environment and Health, and a research scientist at the Centre for Gender and Sexual Health Equity. She holds the Canadian Research Chair in Global Health Equity and Social Justice with Marginalized Populations. Logie's research program advances understanding of, and develops interventions to address, stigma and other social-ecological factors associated with HIV and sexually transmitted infection (STI) prevention and care. She is particularly interested in understanding and addressing intersectional stigma and its sexual, reproductive, and mental health impacts, with a focus on HIV and STIs.

Bishnu Hari Bhatta, the executive director of Partnership for Sustainable Development Nepal (PSD-Nepal), is a distinguished development specialist with over three decades of extensive experience in sustainable development. His visionary leadership drives PSD-Nepal's mission, deeply entrenched in establishing partnerships, fostering community connections, and empowering the most vulnerable populations. Under his guidance, PSD-Nepal has hosted over 1,650 international volunteers and executed 420 projects across 11 districts in Nepal.

The organization has been instrumental in bolstering education, health, and development sectors. Mr. Bhatta has also played a critical role in establishing and operationalizing the South-East Asia Regional Hub for Climate and Health. This initiative focuses on addressing the vital intersection of climate change and health in Southeast Asia, significantly contributing to the advancement of global health and equity.

Founded at the University of Toronto in 2015, with support from the Mastercard Center for Inclusive Growth, the Reach Alliance has since scaled to seven other leading universities around the world. As a student-led, faculty-mentored, research and leadership initiative, Reach's unique approach uncovers how and why certain programs are successful (or not) in getting to some of the world's hardly reached populations. Research teams, comprised of top students and faculty from across disciplines, spend nine to twelve months investigating each case study. Once the data collection process is complete, teams write case reports that are published and disseminated across the Reach Alliance's diverse network of policymakers, practitioners, academics, and business leaders.

Inspired by the United Nations' call to eliminate global poverty by 2030 as part of a set of Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), our mission is to pursue the full achievement of the SDGs by equipping and empowering the next generation of global leaders to create knowledge and inspire action on reaching the hardest to reach.

Reach Alliance