The Political Economy of Water Security, Ecosystem Services and Livelihoods in the Western Himalaya

Over the past three years, this project has investigated the ways in which people living in and around six small towns in the Western Himalaya access water through a diversity of sources, from springs to piped supply, and the sustainability challenges faced by these sources. Through these multiple and far-ranging case studies in Himachal Pradesh, Uttarakhand and Nepal, the team has drawn out important lessons relevant to understanding water supply and demand use dynamics in the hills, as well as the policy options for securing water supplies for the needs of these hill residents.

- **The importance of Critical Water Zones**: Maintenance and growth of urban settlements are contingent on the long-term sustainability of their water source. The active identification, management and protection of the Critical Water Zones which support these sources are pressing and crucial.

- **Inequality and the politics of water distribution**: Within urban settlements, water is highly unequally distributed and access is determined by a range of socio-economic factors. Agencies and institutions responsible for supply need to be sensitive to these issues.

- **The 'political economy' journey of water from source to tap**: Water travels through a varied socio-ecological landscape that influences and is in turn impacted by urban water demand. Better understanding of these competing demands is required when planning infrastructure development for water.

- **Diversification of water strategies and drinking water preferences**: Households in the hills continue to depend on multiple water sources, even when they have piped water connections, as a risk minimisation strategy. There remain strong cultural preferences for spring water that piped connections have not displaced.

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SIAS Southasia Institute of Advanced Studies
CEDAR CENTRE FOR ECOLOGY DEVELOPMENT AND RESEARCH
espa ecosystem services for poverty alleviation
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E·S·R·C ECONOMIC & SOCIAL RESEARCH COUNCIL
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- **Up- and down- stream relationships and negotiations (informal and formal)**: A range of negotiations and conflicts around water access, distribution and quality between up- and down- stream settlements characterise life in the hills. The diversion and appropriation of water can create new conflicts in these interdependent landscapes.

- **Data and knowledge about biophysical and socio-economic processes**: The Himalayas lack long term biophysical and socio-economic data. Decisions around land use, urban planning and development continue to be made in these data-poor environments. In the absence of scientific data, it is particularly important to be aware that there are multiple ways in which knowledge is made and reproduced, as well as diverse actors to be included in understanding this dynamic landscape.

- **Large infrastructure decisions and management choices**: States and donors are developing large-investment and infrastructure projects to supply water in mountain areas, but these "solutions" do not always consider the full range of possible options, especially those that are more local and small-scale. The process of project identification and selection in response to perceived water challenges needs to be more transparent and inclusive.

- **Multiple overlapping institutions for water supply**: Water supply systems to address the needs of small towns are adopting new and varied governance structures. Donor and state-led systems engage with a number of local actors and institutions in the up- and down-stream, influencing development pathways and land use choices, which impact water availability.

Project team

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