

CASE STUDY

Designing a Communication Strategy for Multi-Stakeholder River Management



The success of the Bagmati River Basin Improvement Project depends on the active participation of communities and other stakeholders in conserving and managing basin water resources. Photo credit: ADB.

This is a case study on how to raise awareness and build community ownership among diverse stakeholders for a project to save Nepal's Bagmati River.

Overview

The Nepalese people consider the Bagmati River sacred, and yet it is dying.

The Government of Nepal is implementing a project to improve water resources management at the river basin with financing from the Asian Development Bank (ADB). The project outputs include infrastructure development for improved riverbank environment, capacity and systems building for better river basin management and flood forecasting, and stakeholder engagement through effective communication.

The success of the project hinges on behavioral changes of key stakeholders and marshaling and uniting their efforts to clean the heavily polluted river. Their commitment to river management responsibilities should match their spiritual ownership of the Bagmati.

Project snapshot

Dates	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 2014-2019: Implementation period • 2012 : Stakeholders' workshops & Study tour of Pasig River rehabilitation, Philippines • 2015 : Start of design consultations for civil works • 2016: National NGO recruited & Rollout of communication activities and campaigns
Cost	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • \$31.50 million: Total project cost • Approximately \$2 million : communication and participation, awareness raising (partly financed from a loan and partly from a grant)
Institutions and Stakeholders	<p>Executing agency</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ministry of Urban Development, Government of Nepal <p>Implementing agency</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • High Powered Committee for the Integrated Development of the Bagmati Civilization, Water and Energy Commission Secretariat • Department of Irrigation <p>Financing</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Asian Development Bank, Government of Nepal

Context

The Bagmati is a holy river for both Hindus and Buddhists. Devotees bathe on the banks near the Pashupatinath Temple as it flows through Nepal's Kathmandu Valley. Cremation ceremonies also take place at the temple.

The iconic river is also a part of the daily life for those living near its banks. Water from the river is used to wash clothes and household utensils. The Bagmati also serves as an informal gathering place and a space for rest and meditation.

Most Nepalese have a deep religious and cultural connection to the river that even government ministers make impassioned speeches recalling how they, as children, also bathed in the Bagmati.

Challenges



The river has become the main collector drain in Nepal's capital city Kathmandu. Solid waste was also deposited on the river banks. Photo: ADB.

The Bagmati is dying. Without adequate wastewater treatment, sewage from the Kathmandu Valley inevitably ends up in the river. Trucks dump garbage on its banks. The river has become a repository of human waste. Yet during the dry season, 80% of the river flow is diverted for drinking water.

A Supreme Court case holding the government accountable for the river's cleanup has raised the stakes for achieving results. However, the river needs help not only from government, but also from its residents. Local communities were “guerilla guarding,” and cleaning small sections of the river. Yet, the extent of the pollution exceeded initiatives to clean up the Bagmati. The only way to save the river was for various stakeholders to work together.

Solutions



Brochures about the project and other communication materials were disseminated to close to 5,000 people. Photo: ADB.

The complex mix of stakeholders with their diverse interests, behaviors, and religious sensitivities required a new approach. The project needed a clear, comprehensive communication strategy to drive stakeholders toward a common vision for the river basin.

Development communication is critical in shifting mindsets and changing behaviors, particularly toward channeling the stakeholders' spiritual connection to the Bagmati to cleaning and saving the river. Three key messages emerged from consultations with stakeholders:

- stop polluting the river with household and industrial waste,
- participate in cleanup and beautification efforts, and
- protect water resources.

Project Preparatory Technical Assistance: Short-term stakeholder communication strategy

The short-term stakeholder communication strategy focused on activities that inform concerned stakeholders about the objectives, components, and rationale of the project, and actively engaged them in project preparation.

Stakeholder mapping and analysis

This complex undertaking involved analyzing the many types of actors and organizations with a stake in the river: government, nongovernment organizations (NGOs), civil society organizations (CSOs), riverside communities, and the private sector. It studied their interests, mandates, perception of the problem, and resources.

Results of mapping and analysis

The mapping identified 458 institutions involved in the Bagmati river welfare and solid waste

management.

Various government agencies with overlapping roles and responsibilities manage the river's resources. These are the High-Powered Committee for Integrated Development of the Bagmati Civilization, the Water and Energy Commission Secretariat, the Ministry of Urban Development, the Ministry of Local Development, and the Kathmandu Valley Development Authority. The Water and Energy Commission Secretariat, an apex body, takes an institutional perspective and forms river basin organizations (RBOs). The High-Powered Committee focuses on river administration (including cleanup campaigns), and management and maintenance of the only active wastewater treatment plant in the valley.

Another key stakeholder is the local government, which consists of village development committees, municipalities, and wards (the smallest administrative unit). These serve as direct routes to engage communities, enabling them to adopt and manage stretches of the river.

The mapping identified 18 wards from Sundarijal to Sinamangal in the upper stretch of the Bagmati. The stakeholder analysis showed that changing the behavior of communities in the 18 wards closest to the river has the highest impact on the success of the project. They also stood to gain the most from a successful cleanup campaign.

Eight categories of civil society institutions with a stake in the Bagmati were identified: NGOs, community-based organizations, guthi (a traditional social organization, some of which maintain cultural monuments along the Bagmati), cooperatives, private institutions, schools, batika (small patches of gardens or parks maintained by community groups), and religious institutions. These organizations work on environment, water, sanitation, irrigation and land, and represent the youth, women, and specialized sectors. They form a bridge between project staff and the community.

The private sector, also a stakeholder, includes carpet factories, brick factories, and water tankers, some of which extract large amounts of water while polluting the river. Analysis showed that other stakeholders see the private sector as a source of financial support for the cleanup campaign.

Communication strategy workshops

In addition to community discussions and one-on-one meetings with concerned groups, project staff designed two structured workshops to present a draft communication strategy and participation plan to stakeholders.

The first workshop in August 2012 brought together high-level representatives from government, institutes, and universities to discuss the management of the Bagmati River Basin and, more importantly, how they could work together on the project. Speakers—potential champions for the project—included water resource engineers, retired government experts, legal and institutional specialists, and professionals in integrated water resource management.

The second workshop took place in October 2012, gathering representatives from the communities, farmer groups, women's groups, and NGOs. Participants discussed barriers to communication, participation, ownership, and acceptance of the project, as well as actions to overcome these—all of

which required a strategic approach to communication. NGOs discussed their role in raising awareness and training communities to manage stretches of the river.

Results of the workshops

The workshops increased stakeholders' ownership of the project. Those who participated in the two workshops processed and refined the communication strategy to finalize key messages and channels for specific audiences. Stakeholders discussed their roles and committed to implementing the communication activities.

Comparative study tours

Representatives from government and civil society visited other countries to study how they are reviving polluted river systems, including the Pasig River in the Philippines. They studied media and communication campaigns and observed how support was obtained from government leaders.

The Pasig River in the Philippines was being rehabilitated by the Pasig River Rehabilitation Commission and the ABS-CBN Foundation, the social arm of one of the country's broadcasting networks. There are also multi-stakeholders in the project that were involved in clearing the river's tributaries, the "river warriors" or community volunteers program, and greening the waterways. Communication activities conducted by ABS-CBN Foundation included the 1-minute Pasig River Report series, which was broadcast five times a day, and the annual Pasig River Run, which was held from 2009-2013 to mobilize public and political support.

Results of the study tour in the Philippines

The study tour generated dividends for the Bagmati by solidifying public support and raising awareness on the importance of keeping it clean. Participants returned to Nepal armed with hope and enthusiasm for the Bagmati. The trip inspired fresh insights and lessons that they were keen to distill and try out, such as forming a river basin organization. The chief secretary of the government started organizing a weekly Bagmati cleaning campaign, which would haul in 20 to 30 tons of garbage from the river each week (which continued throughout 2016).

The stakeholder communication strategy

The project team followed a recognized behavior change communication process that helped stakeholders become aware of specific issues that concern them and then move them toward positive behavior change. Finally, they are mobilized to act and sustain their roles.

Elements of the strategy

The communication strategy had a two-pronged objective: share timely and comprehensive project information with communities, government, and the public; and catalyze behavior changes among key stakeholders to respond to issues affecting the Bagmati.

The strategy identified four key audiences with distinct interests, stakes, and behaviors. These are: communities along the river, river basin organizations, concerned government agencies, and local

government. It prioritized stakeholder dialogue to build consensus and continue project support. Messages and methods were tailored to encourage changes in the behavior of specific stakeholders, particularly in moving away from polluting the river and toward conservation and protection, while preparing for recurring river hazards like flooding.

The strategy for the government used a distinct set of approaches to promote and enforce environmentally sound policies and river laws and regulations. Through NGOs, CSOs, and the private sector, the project lobbied for river policies, which included waste and wastewater management. The government planned to help develop a curriculum on river conservation for children.

The communication strategy also specified the need for regular coordination among project stakeholders to improve governance and project management. Since institutional reforms coincided with environmental improvements and community behavior changes, communication was crucial in dismantling silo approaches to water resources management. An integrated water resource management river basin approach provided the necessary institutional framework and mechanisms. The project established a river basin organization to coordinate and monitor river basin management and mainstream community participation.

The strategy also called for developing an NGO platform with a shared vision for the Bagmati to sustain the participation of key stakeholders. The Bagmati Beautification Concern Platform (known locally as Bagmati Sundarata Sarokar Manch) was formed in 2016. It is made up of 458 social institutions identified during the stakeholder mapping. It set up and managed user communities, and raised their awareness. Some parts of the river were handed over to user communities, which are active in cleanup and beautification, such as developing more greenbelts and ensuring that people benefit from riverfront developments.

Awareness-raising activities

To engage and reach local communities, the stakeholder communication strategy listed activities—many of which build on existing ideas and initiatives. The Bagmati River Festival, for example, has celebrated the Bagmati as a destination since 2011. This annual event features exhibits, entertainment, music, sidewalk art, sports, literary fests, and even a music video. Other activities include solid waste management, river restoration, and meetings and focus group discussions with religious organizations and river basin organizations.

Implementing the strategy

The Bagmati Beautification Concern Platform served as a bridge between communities and the project. It helped the local government (municipalities and wards) to design and conduct communication activities, enhance capacity, and raise funds for solid waste management. It trained people from the 18 wards in the project area to manage communication campaigns.

Careful interpersonal communication helped to effectively reach diverse stakeholders and deal with cultural and religious sensitivities, especially since people wanted to ensure that the design and construction of the civil works along the riverbanks were in keeping with their faith. Sensitive communication and negotiation proved necessary, for example, to determine the rise and tread length

for the ghats, the series of steps leading down to the river used for bathing and cremation ceremonies. The project will use local stonemasons and artisans to rebuild these ghats.

The project team began design consultations in mid-2015 for civil works along the riverbanks. Project engineers consulted community members, groups, and local government officials, and shared detailed designs. Based on stakeholder recommendations, engineers incorporated at least 27 new features into the designs. The Bagmati Beautification Concern Platform also worked with the government and the project contractor to conduct joint walks along the banks to jointly decide the location of stairs, ramps, toilets, mourning house, and gates.

Consultations revealed potential problems, such as unverified land claims and upstream dam construction. Again, these required sensitive and careful interpersonal communication to mitigate risks of project delays, disruption, or controversy.

The communication strategy closely hewed to the project's gender equity and social inclusion component. There are gender focal persons representing the 18 wards (through which the river flows) and a stretch in upper Bagmati. The project-trained gender focal points mobilize women to improve the river environment and increase their sense of responsibility to protect river resources. Feedback from women's groups urged project engineers to add lighting to the design of the proposed cycling track and walking path along the river.

Various communication paraphernalia (i.e., brochures, a documentary, jingle) were produced and widely disseminated to close to 5,000 people. Awareness activities were conducted in 24 schools in the project area.



1. Communication as part of operations

The project does not treat communication as a stand-alone intervention merely for project exposure or information sharing. It is a crucial part of project operations. Planning and implementing the communication strategy was adequately funded with a specific strategic approach understood and supported by project stakeholders. Without this integrated approach, the project could not support and sustain infrastructure components.

2. Identifying communication champions

The project recruited champions to support the project across all levels. The communication strategy cultivated and then used these key actors effectively to influence stakeholder groups. Messages and channels were tailored for river communities, the High-Powered Committee, and local and national governments. The support of local politicians was crucial to success. Solid stakeholder analysis revealed potential champions in advance.

3. Aligning communication work and engineering design plans

A communication strategy is only the starting point. The leaders of the Bagmati River Basin Improvement Project found that communication work is more difficult to coordinate than design work, as project manuals provide little specific guidance in this area. Launching communication activities before working on the design can generate inputs for engineers. Social maps or stakeholder analyses can lay the groundwork for stronger designs and better decision-making.

4. Recruiting local NGOs as communications experts

The project started scouting for local NGOs during project preparation and anticipated delays resulting from rebidding or reconsidering qualification criteria. Recruiting communication staff may be of lower priority than construction contractors, but finding qualified NGOs with communication and media expertise takes time. When experts are scarce, consider selecting those with field experience in the project area, even if they are less familiar with ADB procedures.

5. Cultivating internal support for communication components

Mission leaders increasingly recognize the importance of investing in development communication. What is optimal communication—what adds value—varies from project to project. Funding can be challenging, but the earlier staff start, the more likely that staff can identify sources of funds, including technical assistance, special funds, or cofinancing.

6. Learning from and showcasing the impact of communication interventions in similar projects

One of the turning points that facilitated the buy-in and ownership of key authorities and civil society organizations involved in the Bagmati River improvement was the Pasig River study tour conducted during the design stage of the project. Showcasing the impact of successful communication interventions convinced the key stakeholders, particularly the government, to allocate a substantial amount for communication under the project.