

Child Protection and the Nepal Modernization of the Rani Jamara Kulariya Irrigation Scheme Project

In early 2020, Trans-Cultural Psychological Organization Nepal (TPO Nepal), in coordination with the Bank Information Center (BIC), set out to examine the impacts of the Nepal Modernization of Rani Jamara Kulariya Irrigation Scheme (MoRJK) Phase 2 project on children living in project-affected communities in the Terai region of Nepal. This report summarizes key findings from this monitoring research and offers recommendations for the World Bank, the Government of Nepal (GoN) Department of Irrigation (DoI) as the implementing agency, and contractors of the MoRJK project.

Monitoring of the MoRJK project revealed that overall, the community is overwhelmingly pleased with the positive benefits of the project, including increased access to roads and canals. A number of widespread concerns were raised around the employment status of local workers, wage discrepancy, the lack of community engagement in decision making, the safety of canals due to lack of barriers, and the safety of project workers due to lack of adequate protective equipment.

Regarding the status of child protection, although the majority of respondents reported that children were not harmed by the MoRJK project, key informant interviews with women and children from the community revealed anecdotal accounts of child labor and child Sexual Exploitation and Abuse (SEA). A few children reported that they had been involved in child labor on the MoRJK project site despite community members and implementing agencies reporting otherwise. One informant shared a story of a child fatality as a result of child labor on Phase 1 of the MoRJK project. Additionally, accounts of child SEA were reported by individuals and community members, including accounts of verbal teasing of girls by project workers and one account of child sexual assault by a driver on the project. The sexual assault and fatality cases were brought to local authorities, including project contractors, who took action.

Based on BIC and TPO Nepal's project monitoring, this brief offers eight recommendations so that community members can benefit from the MoRJK project and children are safe from harm in this and future projects.

1. END AND MITIGATE CHILD LABOR ON THE PROJECT SITE.

Although the overwhelming response from community members, implementing agencies, and local authorities was that children were not involved in working on the project site, a number of anecdotal accounts from children themselves indicated the existence of child labor on the project. Additionally, an account of a fatality due to child labor during Phase 1 of the MoRJK project surfaced, supporting the likelihood and associated risks of child labor on the project.

To mitigate child labor, community awareness raising around child labor must address more than just keeping children in school. Additionally, project workers need to verify ages through supporting documents so no children are hired on the project site. The MoRJK contractor should provide injury support to workers to dissuade children from entering the workforce when their parents are sick or injured. It is vital that implementing agencies share child labor risks with communities and project workers, and that lessons learned from such incidents are taken into account so that no future children are harmed as a result of such projects.

At all levels, implementing agencies should work to address the push-pull factors of child labor. For example, programs and activities that help increase economic opportunities for young people and their families at the micro level. At the macro level, taking a multidisciplinary approach in collaboration with government and civil society working across health, education, child protection, and other sectors can help facilitate an integrated response to ending child labor in project-affected communities.

2. PREVENT AND RESPOND TO CHILD SEA THROUGH MONITORING AND MITIGATION.

The World Bank and the government contractor must take lessons learned from the anecdotal accounts of child SEA identified through this research and implement more effective prevention mechanisms. Contractors and project workers should be trained by social protection specialists in understanding and preventing child SEA, monitoring and reporting mechanisms, and accountability procedures to avoid such occurrences from happening, increasing in frequency, or escalating in severity.

Relevant World Bank staff members should be trained in child-friendly child SEA monitoring on project sites and with the surrounding community. This monitoring should occur on a regular basis to confirm that cases are reported and followed-up on, and that survivors are provided with adequate and sufficient survivor-focused services and support. The government should work closely with civil society to glean best practices in child SEA survivor response and strengthen their response programming in close consultation with World Bank experts.

3. CONSTRUCT BARRIERS AROUND THE CANALS TO PROTECT CHILDREN.

Community members raised concerns about the lack of barriers on the canals, which have been built in close proximity to the community, posing safety risks of children and animals falling into the canals. The local government, in consultation with the project contractor, agreed to install railings on the canals by September 2020 to address these concerns. These railings need to be prioritized to protect the safety of children and satisfaction of community members in the immediate future.

4. HIRE MORE LOCAL COMMUNITY MEMBERS ON THE PROJECT SITE.

Despite World Bank and government assurances that labor influx would be minimal, the majority of community respondents reported that workers came from outside communities. In line with project agreements, contractors should hire local community members on the project site to improve community feelings about the project, support local economic development, and mitigate the potential risks to children and surrounding communities due to labor influx.

5. REMOVE GENDER WAGE DISPARITY ON THE PROJECT.

Although community members were open to notions of gender equality and commented that more women worked on the project than men, a wage disparity between men and women was identified (~350-800 NPR (USD \$3-8) for men vs. 300-400 NPR (USD \$2.50-\$3.50) for women daily). Contractors should work towards removing this gender wage gap to promote gender equality in the community.

6. ENGAGE LOCAL COMMUNITY MEMBERS IN PROJECT MONITORING.

The Bank should engage community members in project monitoring as stipulated in the project documents to increase stakeholder engagement. Strong stakeholder and community engagement can also lead to better outcomes for children impacted by the project.

7. INCLUDE THE LOCAL COMMUNITY IN AWARENESS RAISING AND DECISION MAKING.

Awareness raising with community members and project workers should take place to confirm that they are aware of project implementation plans, strategies, and impacts and how to submit complaints around project activities through grievance mechanisms. Additionally, the World Bank should include local community leaders such as the Ward Chairperson in relevant World Bank meetings to enhance community cooperation, understanding, and input.

8. IMPROVE PHYSICAL SAFETY ON THE PROJECT SITE.

Project workers should have access to appropriate safety equipment, including gloves, helmets, and boots as appropriate to avoid injuries on the job. The contractor, implementing agency, and the World Bank should take the lessons learned from the fatality of the child involved in child labor during Phase 1 to protect workers from harm by construction vehicles.