

SIKAI

Strengthening Inclusive Education in Nepal



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Content Development

Shomina Roy

Grants Acquisition Manager, World Vision Nepal

Deepak Dulal

Education Sector Portfolio Advisor, World Vision Nepal

Suman Kumar Shakya, PhD

Consortium Manager, World Vision Nepal

Thatcher Ng'ong'a

Program Development and Quality Director, World Vision Nepal

Kriti Baidya

Senior Grant Acquisition Specialist, World Vision Nepal

Ila Pant

MEALS Specialist, World Vision Nepal

Arati Sharma

GESI Specialist, World Vision Nepal

Edward Winter

Senior Technical Advisor for Social Inclusion, World Vision U.S.

Jacqueline Ogega, PhD

Senior Director for Gender Equality and Social Inclusion, World Vision U.S.

Gregory Gee

Communications Program Officer, World Vision U.S.

Melissa Sprake

Country Impact Manager, World Vision Australia

Sarah Shteir

Senior Gender Equality Advisor, World Vision Australia

Viktorija Midelauro

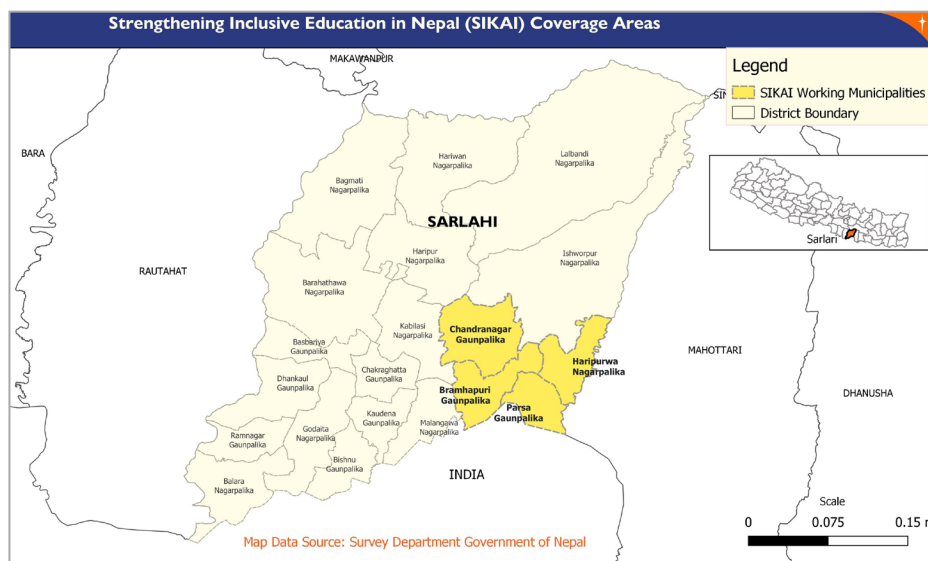
ANCP Disability Advisor, World Vision Australia

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PROJECT SUMMARY

The SIKAI Project ('learning' in Nepali), supported by the Australian Government through the Australian NGO Cooperation Program (ANCP), aims to ensure that the most vulnerable children access and participate equally in education and achieve equitable learning outcomes in basic education. The project is implemented in partnership with Humanity and Inclusion and World Education in Sarlahi district, located in the Terai lowland region of Nepal. The project focuses on three main outcomes: 1) Improving school structures to encourage inclusive education, 2) Changing the behaviors of parents and community concerning children's education, and 3) Improving the policy framework and service deliveries of Rural Municipalities to effect inclusive education. It aims to improve education access, participation, and achievement for children in and out of school, with a specific focus on addressing inequalities related to caste, disability, ethnicity, religion, and gender, reaching 56,457 program participants over five years.

Traditionally, inclusive education projects have focused on children with disabilities. SIKAI has a wider scope as a GESI analysis as part of baseline found that children studying in Muslim schools, children from socially excluded groups and castes and girls who were excluded from accessing education and achieving equitable learning outcomes. The project therefore provides an example of how a project can address multiple vulnerabilities and socio-cultural barriers.



SIKAI works at individual, school, home, community, and municipal levels using various evidence-based approaches outlined below.

For **individuals**, the project has identified the specific needs of children with disabilities and children who are out of school and followed up with home visits using a case management tool to make sure their needs are met and voices are heard.

In **schools**, both Muslim and government schools, SIKAI creates a safe, inclusive education environment for all children. SIKAI works with teachers to enhance inclusive pedagogy following the principles of universal design for learning and learning materials, based on World Vision's Unlock Literacy approach. It works with school administrators to make classrooms and sanitation facilities physically accessible and gender sensitive and to engage parents and children in the running of the school.

In **homes and communities**, SIKAI mobilizes all parents, caregivers, and other community members within Parents Teachers Associations, School Management Committees, and Citizen Voice and Action (CVA) groups to create a supportive environment so all children can learn. SIKAI mobilizes Child Rights Committees to protect all children. It uses reading awareness workshops with parents, especially mothers, and caregivers to show

them how they can support their children’s learning. It works with communities to set up community-based learning for out-of-school children and children who require additional learning assistance. It has identified and provided specialized support and referral to children with disabilities and other vulnerable children. It has informed and mobilized communities to address attitudes that exclude some children.

At the **municipal level**, SIKAI supports municipalities to understand and implement policies and procedures relating to inclusive education and child protection. This includes support for budgeting and enhanced engagement with community members through CVA social accountability tool.

The project uses the following key evidence-based approaches:

Community Change	Community Change (C-Change) is a group-based methodology that uses sustained and facilitated group dialogue at the community level to address socio-cultural norms and practices. C-Change sessions are facilitated by C-Change facilitators. C-Change groups are made up of different stakeholders in the community (school-centered catchment area of the community) coming together to discuss issues facing children, find appropriate solutions, and work with the community to take action to mitigate harmful practices.
Early Grade Reading	Early grade reading aims to improve the foundational skills for literacy acquisition in the early grades (grade 1 to 3), recognizing alphabet, reading simple words, understanding sentences and paragraphs, and listening and reading with comprehension.
Inclusive WASH in Schools	The project has supported gender-sensitive, disability inclusive, and child-friendly toilets and water access, and provided an incinerator for sanitary pad disposal for girls.
Citizen Voice and Action	Citizen Voice and Action (CVA) facilitates dialogue between community and government to enhance the quality of services. CVA participants become aware of relevant rights and better understand how to work with service providers and government to find ways to ensure rights and improve services.
Reading Awareness Workshops	These workshops show parents how to engage and encourage their children to learn.

Changes and responses

The emergence of the COVID-19 pandemic, just few months after start of SIKAI, was the main external change that hindered the project activities. Out of the total implementation duration of 28 months till the mid-term review, schools were closed for 11 months. Many activities were delayed, resulting in some missed targets. To manage this, SIKAI adapted its plans to conduct activities in smaller groups and utilize alternative learning methods, such as distributing self-learning books and initiating community-based learning clubs (Tole Shiksha). These clubs have continued now that schools have returned for children studying in Muslim schools so they can study mainstream subjects. School-based activities and activities involving more human interaction were either modified or shifted to 2021-2022. Remote management was applied as a possible course of action to manage implementation and monitor progress.

INFORMATION ON DATA SOURCES

Data for this promising practice is taken from the mid-term review of the program. The study adopted a mixed-methods approach where quantitative (primary surveys; secondary-Early Grade Reading Assessment (EGRA), Early Grade Math Assessment (EGMA), Education Management Information System (EMIS) and school profiles data on enrollment and annual learning achievement scores) and qualitative (focus group discussion, key informant interviews, in-depth interview, observations) data was collected from various sources, using different methods. Data was collected in December 2021. Primary quantitative data was collected through surveys with two categories of project participants i.e. teachers and parents in the school (n=29 out of 58) and all Muslim schools (n=23) catchment areas. A total of 422 parents and 157 teachers were covered in these surveys. In addition, observation of selected schools and Muslim schools were conducted using a structured observation checklist. Qualitative information was collected from various respondent groups including C-change and CVA groups, Child Rights Committee, children with disabilities, children aged 10-15 years, parents of children with disabilities and other stakeholders such as: the Inclusive Education Working Group (IEWG), School/Muslim school Management Committees and organizations of persons with disabilities.



CONTEXT

Nepal had an adult literacy rate of 68% in 2018. While the literacy rate for male population is 79%, it is only 60% for female population, indicating a huge disparity between the two sexes (World Bank, 2018). Education gender gap in Nepal is highest among excluded castes/ethnic groups and lower socio-economic groups (USAID, 2017). Despite overall progress in literacy rates over the past decades, the most vulnerable children, especially girls from excluded caste/ethnic groups and children with disabilities or learning difficulties still remain the most marginalized groups (USAID, 2017). While the gender parity has almost been achieved in school enrollment, school dropout peaks at secondary level for both girls and boys, largely attributed to economic strain and related stresses. Children as young as 12 are engaged in child labor to support their families economically. In addition to other difficulties that contribute to school dropout or lack of achievement both for boys and girls, gender-related additional barriers makes situation even harder for girls such as lack of support during menstruation, male bias within the family and heavy workloads. School aged girls begin household chores such as fetching water, washing dishes and clothes, cooking and looking after younger siblings. Moreover, Nepal has one of the highest rates of child marriage in Asia and one in four girls get married before the age of 18 (UNFPA & UNICEF, 2017). Children from marginalized groups such as ethnic minorities are more vulnerable to all the above child rights violations (USAID, 2017).

Muslim and government schools are two sources for the provision of primary education in Sarlahi. In schools, poor infrastructure, overcrowded classrooms, teacher absence, and generally low-quality teaching inhibits both girls' and boys' success. However, girls often receive less support from teachers and are regularly disregarded or ridiculed in class based on gender, economic background and caste (USAID, 2017). A large

proportion of Muslim children are educated in Muslim schools that teaches the Quran which is considered a fundamental requirement for children of this community. Muslim schools do not teach any mainstream subjects and cater for primary school aged children only. Merely a handful of Muslim children attend government schools after attending Muslim schools and almost all of them happen to be boys.

The situation for children with disabilities is challenging. Under-estimation is symptomatic of people with disabilities being invisible, excluded and unrepresented in Nepali society. Likewise, disability and learning difficulties in the classroom often go undetected. In the project's survey of 26,300 children, 4.4% were identified with a functional impairment. Lack of identification of mild and moderate disabilities in schools contributes to poor learning outcomes for children, often leading to dropout at higher levels of education. According to official data, 64% of children with disabilities are enrolled at the primary level, whereas only 23% of children with disabilities are studying in lower secondary level i.e. grades 6-8. Data on disability within caste and ethnic groups is scarce, but it is likely that overall education challenges for children with disabilities within these groups is even higher.



The core institutional issues in schools preventing inclusive education are an unhealthy teacher-to-student ratio and a lack of child-centered, inclusive teaching pedagogy. Classrooms are without supplementary/ inclusive education (IE) learning materials such as braille textbooks, print rich material, etc. Inaccessible and unsafe school infrastructure and facilities such as cramped classrooms, a lack of WASH facilities, and an absence of inclusive School Improvement Plans (SIP) create a hostile environment in schools for vulnerable children. Since 2017, the Government of Nepal (GoN) has demonstrated an intent for resolving challenges

faced by children with disabilities and Disability Rights Act and Inclusive Education Policy are two pieces of legislations demonstrating this. Nevertheless, IE in Nepal has not advanced much and tens of thousands of children with disability still have almost no prospects of receiving some form of formal education (Mackee, 2020). Weaknesses in the Act and lack of policy implementation and public services to support the promotion of inclusive education causes a blockage in service and enforcing laws on early marriage, inclusive education, discrimination, etc. Knowledge of existing IE and other child relevant plans is limited and hard to implement given the dearth of trained personnel at municipal and provincial levels. Child protection mechanisms are not linked to education and remain ineffective.

Sarlahi district has an average illiteracy rate higher than the national average. Official data shows that 32% of children aged 5-12 in Sarlahi, 57,887 children are out of school, (UNICEF, 2016). Parents do not consider education as an important aspect of children's wellbeing (when compared to economic constraints) and as such, do little to encourage school attendance. This increases the rate of school dropouts particularly among the impoverished Dalit community; where children as young as 12 are engaged in child labor to support their families economically. The other ethnic groups too are not immune from these challenges. Sarlahi is a male dominated society, where men are considered chief breadwinners and decision-makers and therefore often boys leave school at an early age to support the family financially. School aged girls begin household chores early in life such as fetching water, washing dishes and clothes, cooking and looking after younger siblings.

Once a girl reaches the age of 15, parents start arranging for her marriage as it becomes difficult for a girl to marry if she continues being educated because she would need to be matched with a more educated groom, who will demand a larger dowry (UNICEF, 2016).

The situation of the children with disabilities in Sarlahi District is similar to other parts of the country. To inform the project design, a scoping study focusing on gender-equality and social inclusion (GESI), child protection and disability was carried out by World Vision Nepal from September to December 2018, in the Sarlahi area. This study found that women, children, and children with disabilities of different ethnic groups, castes etc. were marginalized with little variance in level of vulnerability.

The study also found the following principle issues barring inclusive education in the Sarlahi area:

- Communities are immersed in a cycle of poverty and negative cultural practices concerning girls and children with disabilities and their education
- Schools are not equipped to receive marginalized children; there is a dearth of knowledge, skills and resources for inclusive teaching and learning
- Inadequate/absence of local authority systems and implementation of policies that hinder any improvement in accountability in inclusive education

ALIGNMENT WITH GESI APPROACH AND THEORY OF CHANGE

GESI promising practices were assessed using World Vision's GESI approach and theory of change. Specifically, the assessment sought to understand how the project incorporated each of the five GESI domains as outlined in the image below to implement a GESI Transformative program, one that engages with and transforms gender and social inequalities in the long term and addressing unequal power relations, stereotypes and discriminatory practices:

Access | The ability to access, use, and/or own assets, resources, opportunities, services, benefits, and infrastructure.

Decision-making | The ability to make decisions free of coercion at individual, family, community, and societal levels. This can include control over assets and ability to make decisions in leadership.

Participation | The ability to participate in or engage in societal affairs and systems of power that influence and determine development, life activities, and outcomes.

Systems | The availability of equal and inclusive systems that promote equity, account for the different needs of vulnerable populations, and create enabling environments for their engagement.

Well-being | The sense of worth, capability status, confidence, dignity, safety, health, and overall physical, emotional, psychological, and spiritual well-being. This includes living free from gender-based violence, HIV, and all forms of stigma and discrimination.



EVIDENCE OF IMPACT

Access

The project has contributed to increased overall enrollment through activities including community-level engagement efforts using C-Change, provision of assistive devices, infrastructure investments. New students enrolling in school went from 1,271 in 2020 to 2,807 in 2021. There has been a 7.8% increase in enrollment among Muslim girls and 6.9% increase for Dalit girls. The number of children with disabilities increased four-fold from 16 to 66.

For further enhance access for children with disabilities, the project is using the Washington Group questions to assess 26,300 children both in and out of school. Of those, 1,176 had some form of impairment and were assessed by a medical professional. From those, children were identified who needed further support. A hundred children were provided with assistive devices, 56 received glasses and 44 received other devices including orthoses, adapted seating, hearing aids, wheelchairs, and walkers. Others were referred to specialized rehabilitation and surgical services. One of the participants of a focus group with organizations of persons with disabilities commented:

One of the best things that has happened due to the project was a screening program where children with disability and various functional limitations were checked and provided with assistive devices. Children with more profound disabilities were referred to the medical camps for the further check-up and later on to the appropriate referral centers. All the expenses required for the check-up, transportation, and treatment were provided by the SIKAI project.

The project also has provided new ways in which children can return to school or ensure that they stay in school – through Bridge classes and Tole Shiksha.

Bridge classes target children who have dropped out of school, aged 8 to 15 who have been identified during a community mapping process. There are no selection criteria, but classes prioritize children with disabilities, girls, Dalit and Muslim children. Multi-grade classes are conducted over 3 months with between 25 and 30 children starting in January so that children can enter school at the start of the school year in mid-April. Children use the government’s non-formal flexible school package including Nepali, Math, English, Social Studies and Science. Children are assessed before and after to support school enrollment at the appropriate grade level. There are no classes on Friday, so Muslims are able to participate, and classes are held close to children with disabilities and girls to enhance their ability to access the classes.

Tole Shiksha, community-based learning clubs were originally developed to provide an environment for children from early grades to learn when schools were closed because of COVID-19. Since schools have reopened, they have been repurposed to provide instruction in Nepali and Math for students who are studying in Muslim schools and not learning those subjects. Classes run for about two hours and use the government text books and curriculum. This year, the classes will run for at least six months.

The project also has removed other barriers. To address physical barriers the project constructed ten accessible classrooms and five accessible latrines. To mitigate financial barriers, 250 girls with and without disabilities were provided cash equivalent vouchers worth \$25. To enhance access to quality learning materials, the



project provided materials to 47 Early Childhood Development Centers (ECDC) and reading books to 81 schools (58 government schools and 23 Muslim schools).

Participation

The project has successfully used Reading Awareness Workshops to increase the participation of parents and other family members in supporting learning in the home. In focus groups with students aged 10-15, they mentioned various family members helping them with studies and mothers sparing girl children from household chores so they could attend school.

Decision-making

The project has successfully supported Child Rights Committees (CRC) to engage children and their parents in decisions on child protection issues in their communities and to resolve individual cases. CRC members include the school management committee, Head teacher, Parents Teacher Association (PTA), parents and students from the school's Child Club of School. Each community should have a CRC but none were operational prior to the project. The project has created 29 CRCs at ward level and 4 at municipal level. The project also has introduced complaint/suggestion boxes in all 58 schools and 23 Muslim schools to enable students, parents and teachers to influence project decisions.

Well-being

There have been declines in reading proficiency but gains in mathematics. Overall, only 1% of those who have completed grade 3 could meet the National Benchmark for reading i.e. were able to read 45 correct words per minute with 80% comprehension. At the baseline, 4% students had met the National Standard. This decline was put down to disruption to learning due to COVID. Overall low scores are a reflection that Nepali is not spoken at home, and more than half the schools failed to meet the student-teacher ratio of 1:50. Scores for the early grade mathematics assessment (EGMA) however increased from 2.5% at baseline to 10.8% with boys at 14.3% compared to 8.6% for girls.

Overall, the project has been successful in reducing stigma towards children with disabilities. Participants of most of the focus groups with children aged 10-15 years reported that teachers do not treat children with disabilities badly, but that bullying hasn't completely stopped. The project also has started to use a CommCare based application to ensure effective case management for children with disabilities. This application will be expanded to develop monitoring for children with different impairments.

The project has improved protection systems by supporting the four Municipalities level CRCs through training on psychosocial counseling and case management, action plan development, joint monitoring visits and support incorporating child feedback.

Systems

SIKAI has successfully challenged both formal and informal systems.

The use of the Citizen Voice and Action model has been transformational in shifting power from the school to the community and thereby improving the quality of the education and the physical environment. An individual member from the CVA group in the Haripurwa Municipality of Sarlahi district, shared:

After the formation of CVA group, there has been significant changes in the school environment. Before it, there was lack of proper toilet facilities but after formation of CVA group toilet facilities have been improved which is the major achievement of the CVA group. Furthermore,

CVA group has continuously requested for the management/arrangement of the classroom as per the proportion of students. We as CVA group members have requested teachers to be present on time, teach students properly and provide students with necessary guidance and class works which is another achievement of CVA group formation. The Mayor of Haripurwa Municipality has to allocate budget for constructing a compound wall around school and for asphalt roads to help students to get to school.

There has been a very significant transformation in attitudes and beliefs among teachers and parents.

- At baseline, only 5% of parents were supportive towards equal learning opportunities for girls and boys and home and in the community. This increased to 71%. This rate was even higher for parents who participated in key program activities – 80% for C-Change and CVA participants, 84% for parents involved in school management committees or parent teacher associations and 90% for parents who had received support for a child with a disability.
- At baseline, only 17% of parents were supportive of education for girls and children with disabilities. This percentage increased to 45%.
- At baseline, only 12.5% of teachers were supportive of the education of the most vulnerable children. This percentage increased to 98%.

Behavior change communication is embedded into all activities conducted within the project but was

particularly focused within C-Change. The project has established 58 C-Change groups that engage in dialogue on gender and social inclusion issues. They then conduct activities at community and school level to address gender and social inclusion issues including engagement with parents, school enrollment activities, child marriage prevention, holding street dramas and rallies against child marriage, child labor and for improving sanitation at school. As a result, 73% of parents who responded to the survey and were engaged in C-Change activities disagreed with the statement, “The boys should leave school and work and earn money if family is in need,” and 79% disagreed with the statement, “The girls should be married off at a young age and therefore, it is appropriate to leave school to get married.” The C-Change groups brought tangible changes to their communities as observed by a participant in a focus group in Haripurwa Municipality:



Children have been enrolled in our school from the Muslim and Dalit community. Usually, 2-3 children with disabilities also study at school. However, teachers have created an environment where children with disability can also come to school. This is our great achievement. Earlier people were unaware about inclusive education but people of different ethnic backgrounds understand this and children of all community come to school. Our group is trying to move forward in education sector by including all social class of people.

They also have intervened to prevent child marriage directly:

We have Musahar caste (Dalit) families in our community and they were planning to marry their child at a young age. During that time, we conducted rallies with different slogans related to child marriage and they had to stop the wedding.

LESSONS LEARNED AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Overall, the project demonstrates the importance of a holistic set of interventions to support education that includes all children. There are some key elements to a holistic approach:

- **Focusing on Muslim and government schools.** Only in this way are parents able to have options for their children to receive both religious education and a formal education that will give them an opportunity to enter secondary and tertiary education. The project identified possible benefits for Muslim schools if they registered with local government including receiving government teachers, funding and certification of children's learning and has helped them to meet government standards.
- **Developing strong child protection and case management systems.** The project prioritized the function of the Child Rights Committees. These committees were able to empower vulnerable children and their parents and provide them with support services to be able to go to school and stay in school. Committees were able to mobilize community support to solve problems faced by individual children or families and support referral to other services. Committees should be mobilized in neighboring wards and municipalities.
- **Addressing gender and social norms related to education.** The C-Change methodology was hugely successful in challenging deeply-held community beliefs around the value of education for girls and children with disabilities. The project also challenged norms held by teachers so that they were accepting of vulnerable and minority children. By challenging these norms, the project has been able to gain the support of teachers and the community to take the actions necessary to enhance the learning environment at home, at school and in the community.
- **Mobilizing the community to take action to improve the learning environment.** The project was able to use CVA to empower parents and other community members to hold municipal governments and education service providers accountable for attaining the appropriate educational standards. In doing so, parents and community members also understood the vital role they play in creating learning opportunities in the home and wider community. When the project was able to provide parents and communities with support, they then felt empowered to act.
- **Enhancing coordination.** The project brought together the Inclusive Education Working Group. The group is chaired by the District Education Unit and allows for collaboration and coordination among actors working in support of inclusive education.



CONTACTS FOR INQUIRIES

Shomina Roy

Grants Acquisition Manager
World Vision Nepal
shomina_roy@wvi.org

Melissa Sprake

Country Impact Manager, Nepal & Sri Lanka
World Vision Australia
melissa.sprake@worldvision.com.au

Viktoria Midelaury

ANCP Disability Advisor
World Vision Australia
Viktoria.midelaury@worldvision.com.au

Edward Winter

Senior Technical Advisor for Social Inclusion
World Vision U.S.
ewinter@worldvision.org