

Reflections on multi-actor, transdisciplinary leadership training on the water, energy, food, and ecosystems nexus approach for women in Nepal



INITIATIVE ON
NEXUS Gains

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Introduction

The ever-growing challenges of climate change increasingly demand transformative adaptation approaches (Ziervogel et al. 2022) meaning approaches which go beyond technical fixes and challenge the structural bottle necks in governance, legislations, policy. At the same time organisations addressing these issues globally face huge capacity challenges and capacity development (CD) needs to exceed the need for finance (Asensio et al. 2022). The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) estimates that in 2018/19, 44 percent of total climate-related aid funding globally supported capacity strengthening (Asensio et al. 2022). However, despite improvements in philosophy and approach over the past four decades, research has consistently pointed to the limited success of CD programmes and interventions (Kaplan 2000; Land et al. 2015; Asensio et al. 2022; Nago and Krott 2022; Ziervogel et al. 2022).

Nepal is particularly at risk of negative climate change impacts. The CGIAR NEXUS Gains initiative¹ addresses the challenges of optimising trade-offs and building synergies to support the achievement of Sustainable Development Goals through transformations at the nexus of water, energy, food, and ecosystems (WEFE). It works at the critical intersection of food, energy, and water security while preserving the ecosystems underlying food systems in selected transboundary river basins.

In an attempt to avoid common pitfalls of CD interventions identified in previous literature, an innovative transdisciplinary, multistakeholder, capacity-strengthening programme, inspired by critical pedagogy approaches (Freire 2000), was designed. The programme was delivered in 2023 to a group of 22 mid-career professionals, including 17 women, representing different stakeholder groups from nine organisations. The course was innovative in the WEFE sector as it fostered intersectoral collaboration, which is lacking in Nepal (Buchy et al. 2022). To this effect it brought together participants from government, civil society, academia, and the private sector (13 from the Government of Nepal [GoN], two from academia, five from civil society organisations [CSOs] and two from the private sector). This rarely happens, as CD efforts tend to be organisation focused (Pearson 2011). To strengthen the professional capacity for coordination and collaboration, the curriculum mixed biophysical science elements with interpersonal skills development within a gender equality and social inclusion (GESI) frame emphasising a strong reflective learning process.

This paper is based on the first cycle of training delivered in 2023. Given the short time lapse between the end of the course and the writing of this paper, it is not yet possible to analyse the effectiveness of the intervention. However,

reflecting on the challenges and learnings encountered by the design/delivery team contributes to the ongoing discussion around CD. These reflections are based on participant observations during the training, entry, and exit interviews with 10 of the participants, results from entry and exit knowledge, attitude, and practice surveys, and notes from debriefing sessions.

The status of capacity development

Although climate change literature recognises its importance, there is no consensus on how to define CD (Eade 2007; McEvoy et al. 2016; Aantjes et al. 2022; Susskind and Kim 2022). Nor is there agreement on how to conduct and strengthen the design of programmes (Aantjes et al. 2022; Ziervogel et al. 2022) or on how to measure outcomes (Bockstael 2017). Too often conceptualised as 'training' (Kaplan 2000; Asensio et al. 2022), CD has also gained buzzword status (Eade 2007).

The previously limited success of CD initiatives is attributed to different causes, such as a lack of CD theory (Land et al. 2015), structural barriers and inadequate programming (Asensio et al. 2022), a mismatch between expectations, agendas, and incentives (Nago and Krott 2022), inadequate appreciation of the context (Kaplan 2000; Ziervogel et al. 2022), a lack of focus on the need for institutional change (Ziervogel et al. 2022), or the misplaced assumption that non-governmental organisations are better placed than government ones to capacitate local organisations (Eade 2007). Pearson (2011) also argued that CD is usually targeted at organisational development while it is individuals who are capacitated. Individuals are part of a web of social interactions (Eade 2007) which means CD must be seen in a context wider than just specific organisations.

The history of CD in the global South is rooted in colonisation. Specific assumptions were made by outsiders about deficiencies that could be fixed in a depoliticised and non-contextualised way, underlined by the North-South power imbalance (Kaplan 2000; Pearson 2011; Land et al. 2015; Bockstael 2017; Nago and Krott 2022). McEvoy et al. (2016) point to "the discernible shift in language suggestive of a move...away from a mainly instrumentalist view of capacity as a means of filling gaps in specialist expertise in the global South...to a recognition that sustainable capacity involves local ownership, participation and an endogenous...process of strengthening existing human capital and institutional effectiveness".

¹ For more details: <https://www.cgiar.org/initiative/nexus-gains/>

Land et al. (2015) conclude from their analysis that there is now consensus on three aspects of CD: the critical ownership of change, the challenges of dealing with complexity, and the imperative need to understand the context. Ultimately CD is about promoting change in behaviour and attitudes, and it goes further than imparting knowledge. Hence people and organisations need to develop their own perspective or project for change (Sokona 2022). Blanket approaches to CD are inappropriate. Approaches should be contextualised and dynamic and recognise the systemic nature of change (Aantjes et al. 2022). Effective CD to cope with climate change needs to go beyond technical fixes (Susskind and Kim 2022).

The OECD Development Assistance Committee defines CD as “the process whereby people, organisations and society as a whole unleash, strengthen, create, adapt and maintain capacity over time” (OECD 2011). This highlights different levels of focus on individuals and their learning, organisations and their systems, and the context, with the norms and rules that regulate people’s and organisations’ behaviours. For each of these levels, there are specific capacity objectives (Asensio et al. 2022).

Aantjes et al. (2022) developed a framework around four domains: 1) CD for individuals and communities, which ideally leads to empowered community actors demanding change; 2) strengthening organisations to lead and influence for change; 3) learning to work in partnerships and coalitions, which will strengthen the push for change; and 4) CD for duty bearers who will become accountable and responsive to the demands for change.

This definition and framework highlight not only the need for holistic, multipronged approaches, but also that CD must be targeted and involve different actors playing different roles in fostering change. This then implicitly means that there cannot be CD intervention blueprints. For each intervention, careful participatory planning is required to ensure relevance and strengthen local ownership and sustainability. Long-term sustained efforts are also necessary (Susskind and Kim 2022). In addition, there is a need for continual reflection on CD activities, processes, learning, and improvement within the cycle of a training programme (Bolton 2018). This is because change is not linear but instead is an ongoing process; it is often ‘messy’ (Gurung et al. 2023).

The programme

Work package 5 of the CGIAR NEXUS Gains initiative pursues two primary goals: 1) strengthening capacity to develop and implement nexus solutions among relevant stakeholders (men and women) who have critical roles to play in this area; and 2) advancing gender equality by enhancing women

professionals’ influence and leadership in this arena. A scoping study on capacities to develop and implement nexus solutions among key actors in WEFE sectors in Nepal, and on the enabling environment for implementing such integrated approaches, was carried out in 2022 (Buchy et al. 2022). It drew attention to equity and social inclusion, with an emphasis on identifying constraints and strategies to strengthen the capacities, leadership and influence of women in WEFE sectors. As a result, a decision was made to organise a WEFE leadership training programme with the aim of developing a cohort of GESI-sensitive WEFE champions. The International Water Management Institute (IWMI), in collaboration with national experts from multiple sectors and disciplines, designed and implemented this CD initiative in Kathmandu, Nepal.

The CD training was designed as a series of blocks delivered over one or two days per month for six months. The course content included an introduction to WEFE nexus science and approaches, GESI theory and practice, and sessions on leadership and interpersonal communication skills. The sessions were designed to be interactive, and the programme (content and methodology of delivery, quality of participation) was reviewed after each session. For example, it quickly became apparent that the initial half day planned for sessions was insufficient as participants were very interactive and motivated: the length was increased and some short residential sessions were added to provide more time for reflection and to encourage networking between different stakeholders. Additional online catch-up sessions were organised to accommodate busy work and travel schedules for participants unable to attend some sessions.

The underlying assumption was that strengthening the capacity of carefully selected mid-career professionals within key WEFE organisations through a pedagogy promoting reflective practice and mixing WEFE nexus science with leadership skills, would equip key individuals within organisations with knowledge and appropriate skills and attitude. Participants were selected with care and senior managers were asked to support their colleagues during the cycle by providing them with time to attend the sessions and space to ultimately disseminate WEFE ideas within the organisation. Senior managers were invited for the induction and final training sessions in the hope this would raise the profile of the participants within their respective organisations.

The initiative also paired participants with mentors to support them during the cycle and possibly beyond if a strong mentoring relationship was established. The training team reached out to experts in different sectors, from government and other organisations, asking them to volunteer as mentors. A total of 17 mentors were identified; mentors also took part in some key events in the training.

What worked well?

Participant selection

To avoid some of the pitfalls highlighted previously in the literature, the training team was conscious of the need to invest time and effort in selecting participants. CD events are common in Nepal, but the effectiveness of these one-off events, delivered with a technology focus, is questionable. The team wanted to select motivated participants rather than letting organisations randomly select their staff as is the usual practice. Members of the training team and IWMI staff identified WEFE organisations within the government, CSOs, academia, and private sector, and visited each one, meeting senior managers. The team explained the objectives of the course and asked the senior managers to put forward three or four potential attendees based on four criteria: candidates had to show interest in the topic, have time to attend all the sessions, have career progression potential (as the aim was to develop some organisational champions) and should not be transferred to a different post during the course. The team then met and interviewed the potential candidates before finalising the selection of two participants per organisation (either one man and one woman, or two women). The idea was that two staff members from the same organisation would be better able to act as a nucleus of influence. However, three participants were selected from one of these organizations considering the involvement of one participant from the design stage of the leadership program.

These meetings were also an opportunity to disseminate the WEFE nexus concept while also trying to get genuine buy-in to the process from senior management. The assumption was that if senior managers were convinced of the value of the course, they would be more likely to facilitate attendance, and subsequently to provide a platform for trained staff to disseminate knowledge within their own work settings.

All but one participant interviewed stated that their organisation was supportive of them attending the training. None of the participants was transferred outside the Kathmandu Valley during the programme, which can be an issue for GoN employees. One participant even reported that when all three participants from their organisation missed the regular training, their deputy director warned them not to do so again. However, although there was evidence of organisational commitment, over time other priorities emerged, such as public service formal examinations or international travel, compromising regular attendance for some participants.

While the preparatory stage is a necessary step, it is not a guarantee that attendance will be regular, or interest sustained. The team nevertheless considered it an important (but time-consuming) investment.

Interest in the WEFE nexus and GESI concepts

It was clear from the entry interviews at the onset of the programme that the course content was addressing a gap in knowledge and skills.

All respondents said they were motivated to join the leadership programme as they were interested in learning about the WEFE nexus concept and approach. A few participants had only superficial knowledge of the WEFE concept before the training and were excited to join the course as they found the topic relevant. The session most appreciated by the interviewed participants covered the WEFE nexus concept itself. Overall, the course was enlightening and all participants interviewed stated that they no longer use siloed lenses to look at WEFE.

"Now our mind is 'nexusized', I only look through a nexus lens. In meetings within organisations and outside, we [she and her colleagues who also undertook the programme] constantly advocate other colleagues to look at the programmes not only from a forestry lens but also from nexus lenses...I was also one of the panelists at COP28, where I got an opportunity to share about the WEFE nexus approach." (Female participant, GoN, 29 February 2024)

"I was invited to attend three trainings on the same day. However, I found this training most interesting and useful to me, so I took this training and in between the training during lunch hours I participated in another training virtually." (Female participant, Nepal Electricity Authority, 22 February 2024)

Additionally, some participants were interested in learning the basics of GESI, especially a GESI-responsive WEFE nexus.

"I had never attended GESI training. It was completely new to me. This is the first time I understood GESI to this extent. Now, I not only know about the WEFE nexus but also how to integrate it with GESI and agro-mechanisation." (Female participant, GoN, 21 February 2024)

For some participants, the leadership element of the course was appealing. However, since GESI and leadership trainings have been common in the past, participants with prior exposure in these areas felt the course content was not sufficiently advanced.

Diversity in participation

The cohort of participants was particularly diverse, coming from different castes, ethnicities, age groups, education levels and organisational backgrounds. Participants also brought a diversity of sectoral expertise and experiences, which enriched discussions around WEFE nexus challenges.

As the sectoral approach dominates most organisational cultures in Nepal, particularly within the WEFE sectors, participants had not previously experienced working with counterparts across sectors in a coordinated and coherent manner (Regmi and Bandari 2013; Upreti 2023). WEFE actors tend to work in silos while planning and implementing the policies and programmes of their respective organisations. The lack of cooperation and collaboration is also replicated between government, civil society and the private sector. The WEFE nexus leadership programme provided a space for participants to engage and collaborate actively. For instance, one of the group exercises required them to prepare a strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats (SWOT) analysis of any agricultural or natural resource management project/programme considering GESI, multisectoral integration, and sectoral policies and guidelines. The participants' diverse organisational standpoints generated a rich, intersectoral analysis. While this may not result in major changes in individuals, it does provide an opportunity for them to hear and listen to each other's viewpoint and realise that ultimately there is agreement among professionals on the need to cooperate more and identify entry points or levers to foster collaboration between WEFE actors.

The sessions not only supported participants to look at the nexus approach collaboratively, they also supported them in building relationships and networks. During the training, and later, some participants reached out to colleagues in other sectors who had taken part in the training. They have invited each other to events and meetings to discuss relevant programmes. For instance, participants from the Ministry of Forests and Environment (MoFE) invited a participant from the Ministry of Agriculture and Livestock Development to collaboratively develop a climate-related framework for the National Delegation Authority (NDA).

"I am supporting MoFE to develop the NDA framework. They invited me to discuss it. This training has helped me to increase my intergovernment network. Personal connection/networking is important in the government sector. It helps in influencing others and professional growth." (Male participant, GoN, 26 February 2024)

Similarly, some participants were invited by others from the Water and Energy Commission Secretariat to discuss the next phase of the implementation of the Kamala River Basin programme. Likewise, a participant from the Nepal Federation of Indigenous Nationalities (NEFIN) was invited by participants from the Department of Agriculture one of the departments within the Ministry of Agriculture to be a panelist in an interactive programme with agriculture stakeholders on sustainable mechanisation for promoting national production. While we cannot claim that people from different organisations did not collaborate before the course, these examples are promising evidence that participants have seen merit in reaching out for expertise outside their own organisations.

Experiential pedagogy

Most participants appreciated the design of the sessions, which included theoretical presentations, interactive group work, personal reflections, panel discussions, and assignments. A key element of the design was the weight given to sharing experiences but also to self-reflection. Reflection is a valuable tool in attitude and behavioural change (Hartmann et al. 2023) and one of the objectives was to encourage participants to reflect on their own role in promoting GESI, collaboration, and cooperation. Another element was to broaden the concept of leadership beyond how to be a good leader and discuss organisational bottlenecks to fostering transformative leadership, especially in supporting women's access to leadership.

Participants were particularly interested by the experiences and knowledge shared by panelists on issues around women's leadership and safeguarding against sexual exploitation, abuse, and harassment. Some participants were inspired by the leadership journeys shared by women leading grassroots and national movements on natural resources management. They stated that these talks not only helped them to enhance their knowledge but also increased their self-esteem.

"The way the course was delivered with the interactive sessions with national and local champions in the WEFE sectors inspired me. I feel women are always dominated in households and professional spaces. I have faced similar discrimination. After the delivery of these sessions I felt motivated and my confidence has increased... My leadership capacity is developed." (Female participant, GoN, 21 February 2024)

Ultimately, to become capable leaders, it is necessary for individuals, and women in particular, to become aware of sources of oppression. Hearing from others but also reflecting on one's own experience helps to recognise sites of power. This is why power and the analysis of power in professional relationships were also a key element of the course. Studies have shown persistent inequity between men and women, especially in high-level leadership positions (Pick 2024). This continues to be influenced by the role that power relations play, especially when driven by patriarchal values and norms that give precedence to discriminatory gender roles and hierarchical relationships based on age (and even caste/ethnicities). This is the overall context of Nepali society, despite legislation against gender and caste discrimination and positive discrimination measures (in higher education, and civil services) having been in place for several years.

Men and women have different approaches, challenges and experiences with power; thus, the course also introduced different modalities of leadership. A more transformative leadership approach (Aswathappa 2009) would be more adept and powerful in making changes that inspire and motivate people to transform systems, conditions, practices, and even attitudes that obstruct transformational changes at scale.

“The leadership concept was also not shared intensively. But later I realised that the programme was designed in such a way that your understanding of WEFE, its integration with GESI, and leadership skills will be enhanced by the end of the programme. The last session was a group work where we were asked to analyse a case and use the WEFE lens for the SWOT analysis of different projects and present it... This exercise synchronised everything we learned.” (Female participant, CSO, 21 February 2024)

Most participants stated that organisers had done their best in designing the sessions and attempted to include everything. However, they also felt that the session topics were vast, and the expectations were huge, hence the time to deliver them was inadequate.

Flexibility

The team committed to flexibility in terms of designing, planning, and delivering the training in recognition that middle-level professionals have busy schedules as well as busy personal lives filled with additional responsibilities, especially for women staff. The programme was revised and adapted between each block to better serve the learning needs.

“Organisers knew their participants well, so they were flexible with timing. The timing selection [for further sessions] was democratically chosen, asking participants to select the suitable dates.” (Female participant, GoN, 22 February 2024)

Participants liked the flexibility to conduct mini-projects, including field visits to assess the WEFE nexus approach, and conducting sharing sessions within their organisation. However, very few were able to take up this opportunity.

The catch-up sessions held between the workshops to support participants who could not attend the regular classes were appreciated. This approach offered flexibility and, apart from one in-person session, the catch-up sessions were conducted online, in response to the participants' busy schedules. This showed the commitment and effort made by the organisers to deliver content to each participant and also made the participants feel that the training was not just a tick-box exercise.

Length and timings

Most participants appreciated the six-month duration of the training. It helped them to internalise learnings from each workshop between the sessions. If the training had been designed to last one week, they would not have been able to process the learnings.

“Later I realised that if everything had been done in a week, we would not have had the time to internalise the content. The programme engaged us for six months – we got months in between to be involved in assignments and meet mentors. If the course was completed within a week, we would have forgotten everything we learned immediately.” (Male participant, GoN, 24 February 2024)

However, some participants felt that the one-month gap between sessions allowed them to procrastinate and delay completing the assignments. The gap also made it more challenging for some to remember lessons from the previous month, highlighting different learning styles and needs. Finding the right lapse of time between sessions is a bit of guess work: long enough for participants to integrate the lessons learned but not too long as to allow procrastination and delay in completing the assignments. Considering all these factors, the ideal gap between sessions could be 10-15 days.

Mentoring

Each participant was paired with a mentor with expertise in fields relevant to WEFE sectors or with a GESI expert. A list of mentors was provided to the participants for them to choose three mentors they preferred. Based on their preferences one mentor was allocated to each participant. The mentee-mentor pairs were asked to prepare a Purpose Road Map (PRM)² for the mentee to illustrate their professional goals and the support they needed to work towards them. Apart from four participants from government organisations, all participants met their mentors to discuss their career goals and the support they needed within the six months to conduct their mini-projects. The participants found their mentors very approachable and supportive.

“My mentor and I wanted to write an article on how the women’s participation agenda has been incorporated into sustainable/scientific forest management policies, institutions, and programmes from the national to the grassroots level. I went to her office... She was very encouraging/welcoming... She was well prepared and came with the presentation as a mentor what her role was. It was overwhelming for me. She used to share articles with me. She came so well prepared that I felt like I had to give my best. We also shared our personal experiences... we met two times for this purpose. Then we both became busy... I had to go to the COP28, had an exam, and then after that, it stopped.” (Female participant, GoN, 29 February 2024)

The mentoring experience also had an unexpected effect as one academic participant shared that his approach to his students had changed after being a mentee himself.

² The Purpose Road Map (PRM) is a framework that helps to visualise how to plan to meet one’s objectives. It shows the goal that one wants to reach, how to reach it and what kind of support is required, and from whom. (Koirala and Pradhan, 2023)

"I have been supervising many thesis students. However, my relationship with them was hierarchical. I was strict with them and did not act friendly. However, after the programme, I learned how a supervisor should be. I have made drastic changes in the way I interact with my students. I take them for tea and discuss their thesis."
(Male participant, Academia, 10 April 2024)

Some female participants had a male mentor and vice versa. Having a mentor of the opposite gender identity impacted the ability to share problems, especially for women participants when they needed to address gendered attitudes and behaviours at work. However, most were not uncomfortable sharing professional issues and receiving guidance, but in the future, this aspect of pairing mentor mentees according to gender lines needs to be considered on the whole the mentoring element was positive. Those participants who were able to take up the opportunity to have periodic consultations and discussions felt they gained from this element of the programme. The organisers followed up regularly with both mentors and participants, and encouraged them to meet in person or online at least once a month. Unfortunately, many of the participants were unable to make full use of the time that the mentors had volunteered to support them.

There were important learnings from the mentoring element of the programme. Given the time constraints, the organisers reached out to mentors within their own networks and provided choices to the participants. Most of the participants got their first or second choice of mentor but many did not know their mentors well, even though they recognised their expertise since all mentors were senior professionals. A mentoring relationship calls for mutual understanding, confidence and trust. Not having the opportunity to select their own mentors, and not knowing the mentors allotted to them, likely created some challenges in developing a conducive environment for making better use of the mentoring opportunities.

What were the bottlenecks?

Challenges of diversity

While the diversity of participants within the group led to many positive outcomes it also posed several challenges. Participants ranged from early-career to mid-career professionals and had different backgrounds and levels of education and competence in the English language. They displayed a range of capacity for conceptual and abstract understanding, as well as different levels of sectoral knowledge. For instance, one participant brought a wealth of experience and practical knowledge on indigenous rights in WEF sectors but had limited technical and theoretical knowledge.

"I did not understand many terminologies used in the training. I translated it into Nepali via Google but still, it was difficult for me to understand the technical terms... when I participated in international conferences, I was provided translators but in Nepal, this is often ignored."
(Female participant, CSO, 1 April 2024)

Although the sessions were delivered in Nepali, the presentation slides were in English, which some participants found hard to follow. Additionally, the mandatory and recommended reading materials were all in English. The organisers had not anticipated English would be an issue as it is a compulsory subject from secondary school which all the early/mid-career professionals from government and non-government organizations would have attended. However, the variable quality of schools (whether urban or rural, private or fee-paying schools) and the reading and speaking practice and exposure to the language affect individual proficiency levels. This oversight also partly reflects the education and professional profile of the team members which tends to be Kathmandu-centric.

Despite the team attempting to present diverse examples, some participants struggled to see the relevance of examples from sectors that were not their own. Likewise, participants who had previously undertaken GESI training felt that the GESI sessions were too simple, while for others who had not been introduced to the subject, they were revelatory. Further, the participants' education background and level of training also had an impact.

"I had taken intensive training on GESI so I already knew about the GESI concepts taught in the training so the session was not that useful to me. However, this training taught me not to look at GESI only in the forestry sector but also in the WEF nexus and how the policies and programmes of the forest sector affect them... Similarly, I felt that the capacity of the participants was not assessed. AA had her own capacity, BB had a different capacity, I have a different capacity. I remember YY... who is also a person with a disability, had a different capacity... You cannot assume all participants to be at the same level. Her need should have also been addressed. Participants should also have been looked at from intersectional lenses." (Female participant, GoN, 29 February 2024)

In recruiting participants for the training, the organisers focused on including women from key WEF sectors – government, civil society, academia, and the private sector – and to a certain extent on their social backgrounds (in terms of caste/ethnicity). Although the team attempted to select participants from diverse backgrounds, it failed to assess their range of needs and capacities. While differences in background and levels of education, and language challenges, specifically among a few participants, had been acknowledged as a concern, limited attempts were made to take them into consideration during the training.

In hindsight, had more time and resources been available, participants could have been grouped into different cohorts based on their specific needs and capacities. The conceptualisation of the training package (based on the key gaps identified by the scoping study) could also have been more tailored to the specific technical skills and understanding required by the different groups of participants. The attempt to package the three key concepts of WEFÉ nexus, GESI, and gender-responsive leadership was perhaps too ambitious given the diversity of competency levels.

Diversity among the participants also resulted in a diversity of expectations. Some participants were more interested in getting in-depth knowledge on the WEFÉ nexus, while others were more interested in learning about GESI or advancing their leadership skills. Although all participants stated that the training sensitised them to the WEFÉ concept, some said it did not provide sufficiently in-depth knowledge on the concept, while others raised similar concerns about GESI and leadership skills.

"I am a quiet person. I thought after taking this training my leadership skills would greatly be enhanced; however, I cannot find a huge difference." (Female participant, GoN, 22 February 2024)

"The training helped me to enhance my understanding of the WEFÉ nexus linkage with GESI; however, we did not get much insight into the nexus frameworks to assess it, and implement it." (Female participant, Academia, 21 February 2024)

More generally participants would have liked hands-on practical exposure, such as through a field visit, to see how a WEFÉ nexus approach can be implemented, or role plays to better identify and experiment with leadership skills. Some participants pointed out that they learned more about leadership through the behaviour of the training team and panelists than through the presentation on leadership.

Challenges of interdisciplinarity

While many participants appreciated the holistic approach of the course, some expressed confusion about the interdisciplinary nature and the mixing of theoretical knowledge on nexus science with leadership skills. The course may have been too ambitious, given the diversity of the audience. Some participants stated the content was vast and covered too many topics, seemingly without connections.

"The content of the course was going in parallel. So was the mentor-mentee part. It was not linked with each other. The mentor attended the workshop in the beginning and after that only at the end. Hence, this mentor-mentee programme did not have a linkage with the WEFÉ nexus

course. On one side, we kept on taking the training, but it did not merge with the mentor and mentee concept." (Female participant, GoN, 29 February 2024)

Participants who missed sessions also struggled to see the linkages between the three core pillars. Likewise, the participant from NEFIN found the sessions did not integrate indigenous and people with disability issues and found them more focused on gender and Dalit³ issues.

Irregular attendance

Although the organisers negotiated training dates with the participants, attendance by some was irregular because of conflicting demands from their organisation, other interests and personal priorities. For example, some participants chose to prioritise international visits or national workshops. Five participants who were enrolled in further studies had to sit an examination during the training cycle. Two participants from one GoN organisation attended only two sessions and left the training.

"I could not attend the first session due to my work and attended the first catch-up session. Later, I had to attend an international conference. After that, I was hesitant to attend the training as I had missed other sessions." (Female participant, GoN, 5 April 2024)

In addition, one female participant from another GoN department wanted to stop attending the training because of her workload. However, her manager asked her to continue attending as her male colleague from the same department attended infrequently. She later explained that her department was short staffed, and she felt the workload was unevenly shared between male and female colleagues. For example, she reported that the male participant from her department had attended multiple international and national trips during the training, which explained his lack of attendance. While it may be anecdotal evidence of uneven treatment, this example corroborates what female WEFÉ professionals reported in the earlier scoping study: men tend to be given priority for international field trip opportunities, which generate additional income through the payment of daily subsistence allowances, while women stay in the office and take on a share of the men's workload during their absence (Buchy et al. 2022).

Attendance data showed that GoN staff were more likely than other participants not to attend the sessions regularly or in full. This can be partially explained by their workload and the organisational culture of last-minute requests from superiors, which must be attended to as a priority by more junior staff. GoN staff are also highly sought after by development partners for multiple dissemination workshops/training events and with staff shortages the same people attend

³ The Hindu belief system followed in South Asia previously categorized Dalit caste group as the lowest caste group. The individuals within the Dalit caste group were considered impure and untouchable.

different workshops every month if not every week. This is a systemic issue which the organisers, despite their initial investment detailed above, could not avoid.

Supply-driven nature of the programme

Although the decision to develop this WEFE nexus CD cycle was based on a scoping study, ultimately the introduction of the WEFE nexus concept is the result of a supply-driven process. There is recognition within the WEFE sector of the need for more exposure to the concept, and the course was designed and made freely available as part of the CGIAR NEXUS Gains initiative. It is difficult to say whether participants would have taken the course more seriously if they had had to pay for it.

Our data show that some participants, despite the careful selection process, did not take the programme and assignments seriously.

“More than what I wanted from the programme, it was like what you wanted to deliver. It was not at all need based.”
(Female participant, GoN, 29 February 2024)

Further, a few participants approached the training like any other conventional training and did not see its importance in their professional and personal lives. This could be the result of training fatigue as Kathmandu-based professionals have many training opportunities. There may also have been some degree of cynicism as, for some, the WEFE nexus is viewed as yet another donor-driven concept.

Limited effectiveness of mentorship

While participants and mentors appreciated the mentoring opportunity, most mentees felt they had not taken full advantage of their mentor's presence. Mentees were asked to meet their mentor at least once a month in person or virtually and most did so over the six months. Some met their mentor frequently and reported having benefited professionally and personally but four participants from government organisations did not meet their mentor at all. Mentors found their mentees very busy and exhausted in balancing their professional and personal lives. This was particularly the case for mid-career female professionals, with some having young children and demanding responsibilities at home and work.

“My mentor was a working professional and was busy during working hours. I have a small kid and for me it is impossible to meet my mentor after working hours. My family has some expectations from me. I could not also have virtual meetings after five too as my child does not allow me.” (Female participant, GoN, 22 February 2024)

“My mentee did not show interest when I offered several times that I could come to your office if you are busy... [Maybe it was because we did not know each other before] the mentee was hesitant.” (Female mentor, Private sector, 28 November 2023)

Some mentors were shocked by the minimal interest shown by their mentees.

“The initial mentee given to me was changed saying that the mentee requested to have a mentor of his/her field. I did not meet my mentee at all in these six months. I heard from other mentors that they were meeting their mentees occasionally and having a productive time as well. I was wondering why this happened to me.” (Female mentor, Private sector, 28 November 2023)

Upon reflection mentees could perhaps have been given the opportunity to choose their mentor, as this may have facilitated better exchanges. Some mentees did not feel comfortable with a mentor from a different organisational background as they felt they could not take the relationship forward beyond the duration of the training.

Challenges of completing assignments

As part of the strategy to keep participants engaged, and provide concrete opportunities to implement some of the lessons between sessions, the team designed some takeaway activities. Participants were given reading materials ahead of sessions and some stated that they read all the materials shared, while others did not. They were also encouraged to keep a learning journal (Nückles et al. 2004).

Often used in higher education settings, the learning journal (or learning diary) is a tool to encourage reflection around learning insights emerging during a course. It was suggested that participants reflected on learnings from the training, on improvement in their leadership capacity or on their mentor-mentee relationship, and discussed relevant personal and professional challenges faced in implementing their new learning. The learning journal could then be shared with the trainers or peers or kept confidential.

Most participants interviewed did maintain a learning journal. Some shared it with the team, but others did not. Two respondents stated that they had written personal things which they were not comfortable sharing and two others had written notes and plans which they also did not feel like sharing. Some participants stated that the learning journal reminded them of the goals set in their PRM and helped them to focus on their careers and interests. In the latter part of the training, participants were given time to record their thoughts and learnings in their journals to ensure they were able to make some reflections.

"The learning diary was good - I have been journaling for years - however, the reflection diary taught me to journal more systematically... It helped me to declutter my thinking and release my burden, and also helped me to think systematically... I maintained the reflection diary till I attended the sessions." (Female participant, CSO, 27 February 2024)

Participants were also asked to complete a writing project with the guidance of their mentors within six months, which mostly comprised writing a blog or article. Additionally, they were encouraged to offer sharing sessions in their organisations on the WEFE nexus concept and were asked to submit the budget required for conducting them.

During the course of the training, two participants published articles, and four conducted sharing sessions with their colleagues. Most participants stated that they had started writing an item for publication but could not complete it within six months because of their workload, the challenges of writing, and, to some extent, limited suggestions from the team.

"After 9-5, I am someone's father, someone's relative, and I have multiple responsibilities. It's also challenging to do such assignments during working hours. Apart from reading materials, I do not like the concept of giving assignments. Adult learning should not include assignments - time should be allocated within the workshop itself to do such assignments." (Male participant, GoN, 26 February 2024)

While many participants did not fully complete the assignments, they recognised their value in helping to internalise the learning.

Discussion and conclusion

The team⁴ behind the design and delivery of the WEFE nexus leadership course attempted to develop a holistic, multipronged learning programme to avoid pitfalls described in the literature. The training focused on building the capacity of individuals and equipping them with the knowledge and attitude needed to promote intersectoral and interorganisational cooperation and strategic planning. Although resources were limited, two participants from each organisation were selected in order to create a core group to drive change within their organisation.

The delivery team, which also actively led the design of the training, was entirely Nepali. All team members had extensive expertise in adult learning, WEFE sectors, GESI concepts and operational issues, and a good knowledge of the political and social context. The approach consciously

promoted bottom-up processes to nurture a collective analysis and understanding of the structural constraints to implementing the WEFE nexus in Nepal. The objective of mixing nexus science and GESI issues with the development of personal leadership skills was to propose a holistic package showcasing the value of considering different aspects of capacity to address effectively the challenges posed by climate change.

Deliberate efforts to promote reflection by the training team and the participants were built into the process. There was ongoing reflection after each session on the content and delivery methods and subsequent sessions were adapted accordingly. This flexible approach required more human resources than originally budgeted for (for example, to provide additional online catch-up sessions) and was time- and resource-intensive for both the trainers and the trainees.

At this stage, it is not realistic to assess whether the approach was successful in increasing awareness among participants of the need for change and to promote change within their organisation. Since the end of the course, some participants have engaged in several WEFE nexus-related activities, such as including the nexus concept in project proposals, organising sensitisation events with colleagues and students, and publishing articles on the topic. These are non-negligible concrete outcomes, but clearly more support is needed to consolidate the learning and the implementation of some of the participants' action plans. To this effect, follow-up activities are planned in 2024, such as refresher sessions and dissemination events within respective workplaces. The effects of these activities will be monitored.

Although we can confidently say that participants found the approach novel and engaging, we also note the reported shortcomings. Of five male participants, three showed minimal engagement. GoN staff, crucial for the implementation of a WEFE approach and key actors in providing leadership to create a gender-responsive working environment in their offices, were also comparatively less engaged. While they theoretically have the most power to foster change, given their position within the policymaking establishment, a bureaucratic culture, with centralised and hierarchical decision-making, impedes change.

The challenge of finding the right work-life balance was a recurring topic for all participants, particularly for women, who still shoulder gendered household responsibilities. It is difficult to see how this issue can be overcome. Limited data and few concrete examples of WEFE nexus implementation in Nepal also made it difficult for some participants to envisage how the concept can be applied. The absence of a WEFE nexus policy or framework in Nepal is a major structural barrier to different actors working together effectively. Clearly CD is only one tool to promote change and support dissemination of the WEFE nexus concept.

⁴ The 'team' consisted of staff from IWMI Nepal, Bioversity Alliance, and resources persons. The delivery team was led by Great International and the Governance lab, two Nepal civil society organisations, but also included IWMI staff for specific interventions.

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