

Country profile

Nepal

World Vision

GEOGRAPHY

Nepal is located between the southern slopes of the Himalayas and the north of India. It is home to the world's highest mountains, including Mt. Everest. The Himalayan Mountains cover 15 percent of Nepal and most of the land in the Himalayas is permanently frozen. By contrast, the flat plains or Terai regions close to India have a hot, humid climate and make up 18 percent of Nepal. In between, the Hills make up 67 percent of the country.

Kathmandu is the capital city and lies in the Hills of Nepal. The city has a population of approximately one million people.

PEOPLE

Religion is important in Nepal. Until Nepal became a secular republic in May 2008, the country was unique as the only official Hindu state in the world. Over 85 percent of its population is Hindu, with 5 percent Buddhist and 3 percent Muslim. Buddhist and Hindu shrines and festivals are respected and celebrated by members of both of these faiths.

Nepali is the official language of Nepal but many government officials also speak English.



Water and sanitation projects in Kunita's community are helping to improve health.



Map of Nepal, courtesy of The General Libraries, University of Texas at Austin

HISTORY

Modern Nepal was created in the second half of the 1700s when a unified country was formed from a number of independent states. In the mid-19th century Nepal's government ministers took control of the country and royal power was limited.

In 1990, King Birendra introduced a multiparty parliamentary democracy in Nepal. This period also saw the emergence of a revolutionary force, the Maoists, and ten years of internal conflict with the government led to the loss of 15,000 lives. In 2001, during this period, Nepal also lost a much respected royal family in a massacre. The only survivor in line to the throne, the late king's brother, King Gyanendra, was unable to replace his brother's popularity. He took absolute power in 2005 and did nothing to gain favour. After massive pro-democracy protests in April 2006, King Gyanendra gave up direct rule and reinstated parliament, which then quickly moved to diminish his powers.

In May 2008, the monarchy was formally abolished and the country officially became a secular republic, with the President as the head of state.

ECONOMY

Nepal is among the poorest and least developed countries in the world with almost one-third of its population living below the poverty line. Agriculture is the mainstay of the economy, providing a livelihood for 75 percent of the population and accounting for 38 percent of GDP. Industrial activity mainly involves the processing of agricultural produce including jute, sugar cane, tobacco, and grain.

Security concerns relating to the civil conflict have led to a decrease in tourism, a key source of foreign exchange. Nepal has considerable scope for exploiting its potential in hydropower and tourism, areas of recent foreign investment interest. Prospects for foreign trade or investment in other sectors will remain poor, however, because of the small size of the economy, its technological backwardness, its remote and landlocked geographic location, civil strife, and its susceptibility to natural disaster.

LIVING CONDITIONS

There has been a widening gap between the wealthy urban elite and the majority of the population. Government measures have made positive changes in Nepal, leading to reduced infant-mortality rates, better medical facilities and increased access to clean water. Despite this, the benefits of government initiatives have primarily reached people living in the cities.

More than two-thirds of people who own land in Nepal possess less than one hectare. Fewer than one in ten female farmers own land. Without secure ownership, women lack property, access to credit and the means to invest in productivity improvements. This diminishes the health and nutrition of their families.

While health services have improved over the past twenty years, most people still do not have access to organised medical care. Life expectancy is twenty years less than Australia and infant mortality is among the worst in Asia.

Nepalese soil and forests are being exploited at unsustainable levels. This, combined with Nepal's growing population, has meant that life has become increasingly difficult for people in rural villages. Many peasant families are leaving their land in search of better conditions in Nepalese and Indian cities. Global warming is starting to impact on glacial melts in the Himalayas, leading to more frequent and larger landslides and floods.



Agriculture is extremely important in Nepal. Women in this community are working hard during planting season to give rice crops the best chance of success.

Comparatively speaking...

CATEGORY	NEPAL	AUSTRALIA
Population in millions	28.5	20.9
Urban population (as % of total)	17%	89%
GDP per capita (PPP US\$)	\$1,200	\$34,923
Population living on less than \$2 a day (PPP US\$)	68.5%	0
Percentage of population undernourished	17%	<2.5%
Adult literacy rate (% age 15 and above)	male – 62.7% female – 34.9 %	male - 99.0% female - 99.0%
Life expectancy at birth	65.4 years	81.4 years
Infant mortality rate (per 1000 live births)	47	4
Internet users (per 100,000 people)	4	698
Physicians (per 100,000 people)	21	247

Source: CIA Fact Book, United Nations Human Development Report, 2009. Oxford University Press, New York.

Nepal hosts about 100,000 refugees from neighbouring Bhutan, who fled following harsh anti-Hindu reforms. There are ongoing negotiations with Bhutan over the return of the refugees.

EDUCATION

Reduced civil conflict has caused increased school enrolments, but nearly one in three of Nepal's children continue to miss out on their primary school education. Over 50% are missing secondary school and adult illiteracy rates remain high – especially for girls and women. Also, for those children who do have access, the quality of education is generally poor.

WORLD VISION AUSTRALIA'S WORK IN NEPAL

- focuses on early childhood education and development
- increases rural access to better and more food through improved agricultural techniques
- helps people access small loans to encourage the development of small enterprises
- aims to ensure people have access to safe water and sanitation
- includes projects that focus on improved maternal and child health care

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