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SAJHEDARI BIKAAS PROGRAM

Quarterly Conflict Assessment
(November 2013)

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Sajhedari Bikaas Project

Partnership for Local Development

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An initial perception assessment of conflicts, tensions and insecurity in Sajhedari Bikaas project districts in Nepal's Far West and Mid-West regions.



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*Prepared by Saferworld for the Sajhedari Bikaas Project
(Under Contract no. AID-367-C-13-00003)*

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Introduction

Sajhedari Bikaas Project is a USAID-funded 5-year project aimed at empowering communities to direct their own development. The project is carried out in six districts of Mid-West and Far-West districts, Dang, Banke, Bardiya, Surkhet, Kailali and Kanchanpur.

Existing and emerging conflicts are or have the potential to become obstacles to community development, inclusive and accountable decision-making and improved governance. To ensure that the Sajhedari Bikaas project is based on sound analysis of the context and understanding of the conflict environment, and to enable it to spot and react to changes in the context, a series of conflict assessments will be carried out during the first half of the project. This report summarizes key findings from the first in a series of conflict assessments that was carried out by Saferworld in September 2013 for the Sajhedari Bikaas project.

The conflict assessments are carried out quarterly in six districts of Nepal: Kailali and Kanchanpur (Far West); and Banke, Bardiya, Surkhet and Dang (Mid-West). Rather than providing a full analysis of the conflict situation in the districts every time, they focus on changes that have occurred since the last assessment was carried out [in this case, since February 2013 when the Rapid Conflict Assessment (RCA) was carried out] and are intended to provide an understanding of developments and trends over time. Where issues highlighted by respondents are relevant to better understand the general situation and longer-term developments in the target districts, these have been mentioned.

For this first assessment, 60 key informant interviews (KIIs) were carried out with representatives from the administration, security and justice service providers, civil society, and others well placed to comment on conflict and security dynamics. 12 group discussions (GDs) were also held with representatives from local communities and youth, mainly at the district and regional level (see Annex 1, Methodology). As the findings are based on qualitative research, they reflect the perceptions and opinions of those consulted; many of the findings would benefit from more in-depth analysis, as the assessment was only able to touch upon them rather than exploring these issues in detail.

Field research took place on 11–19 September 2013; this was a period when preparations for and debates around the elections to the Constituent Assembly (CA) planned for 19 November 2013 were ongoing, but before the security situation deteriorated as a result of (partly violent) attempts to intimidate party candidates and/or to disrupt elections.



An executive summary at the start of the report outlines key findings from the districts, highlighting the main commonalities and differences between the locations researched. This is followed by district-specific chapters that cover key issues and developments, focusing on the last six months. The report concludes with some recommendations for Pact on key issues and priorities to consider in the upcoming project phases. A list of acronyms can be found at the end of the draft report. The methodology, final versions of tools and guiding questions used can be found in the annexes.

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Abbreviations

CA	Constituent Assembly
CPN-M	Communist Party of Nepal – Maoist
CPN-UML	Communist Party of Nepal – Unified Marxist-Leninist
DDC	District Development Committee
GD	Group Discussion
KII	Key Informant Interview
JTMM	Janatantrik Terai Mukti Morcha
NC	Nepali Congress
RCA	Rapid Conflict Assessment
SGBV	Sexual and Gender-based Violence
SP	Superintendent of Police
UCPN(M)	Unified Communist Party of Nepal (Maoist)
UFW	Undivided Far West
VDC	Village Development Committee
WCO	Women and Children Officer
YCL	Young Communist League

1. Executive summary

Major developments in the six districts covered by this assessment in the period since the Rapid Conflict Assessment (RCA) was carried out in February 2013 have centered on the elections to the Constituent Assembly (CA) scheduled for 19 November 2013. Apart from the emergence of political issues relating to the elections, the situation in these districts remained largely unchanged over the last six months.

Key findings

Political tensions, conflicts and/or violence

At the time of data collection, tensions related to preparations for the CA elections existed mainly between political parties or within the parties themselves, and did not involve the general public in the districts. Few incidents of violence and intimidation had taken place, but many respondents expressed concerns that violence could increase as the elections approach. The risk of violence was especially highlighted by respondents from the Far West (Kailali and Kanchanpur districts) and youth. Most respondents wanted to vote in the elections, but also said that the security situation would determine whether or not they go to the polls.

There is a high level of frustration with political parties among respondents, and expectations that any positive changes will occur after elections are low. People are expected to vote along identity lines much more than in the past; this is a result of the polarization that followed the 2012 conflicts and tensions over the federal model for Nepal, as well as widespread disappointment with parties' promises on other issues.

As well as highlighting the role of security providers, including the Nepal Police, many respondents said that it was crucial for political parties and their leaders to speak out clearly against violence in order to ensure that elections take place peacefully. Many believed that the political parties were in a key position to prevent violence if they desired, whereas other actors including CSOs could only play a supporting role in this.

Identity-based tensions, conflicts and/or violence

Tensions between identity groups, particularly *Tharus* (the largest indigenous group in Terai) and *Pahadis* (hill-origin) in the Far West (and, to a certain extent, the Mid-West) have decreased significantly since the clashes over identity-based federalism in April-May 2012 between Tharu supporters of a Tharuhat state and Pahadis calling for an Undivided Far West (UFW). However, respondents described relations between the

groups as “cold” and said that communities continue to be polarized along identity lines. There were concerns that tensions could escalate again once a new CA is elected and debates about federalism resume.

Respondents also mentioned mistrust and resentment in relations with Madheshi and Muslim communities in the districts. Caste-based discrimination against Dalits persists, although some respondents felt that it has decreased, especially in urban areas.

Crime and armed group-based tension, conflicts and/or violence

Drug-related crime remains a key concern, including widespread drug use among youths as well as thefts and burglaries carried out by drug users. Other crimes mentioned included smuggling of drugs and small arms across the border with India, as well as trafficking of women and girls into India.

Other security issues, including sexual and gender-based violence

Sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV) was widely seen as a major issue across the districts, with women in particular being victims of rape and domestic violence. Cases in which children and young girls were victims of sexual violence were specifically highlighted. Many respondents thought that the problem of SGBV was increasing, although it was not clear whether this perception was a result of an increase in violence or simply more cases being reported.

Suicide is also perceived as increasing, among women in particular; some respondents linked the perceived high rate of suicide among women to SGBV and domestic violence. Cases of murders being disguised as suicides were also mentioned.

Resource-based tensions, conflicts and/or violence

Tensions over resources previously outlined in the RCA remain present in the region, including timber smuggling from forests and disputes over the distribution and use of scarce agricultural land.

The role of youth in tensions, conflicts and/or violence

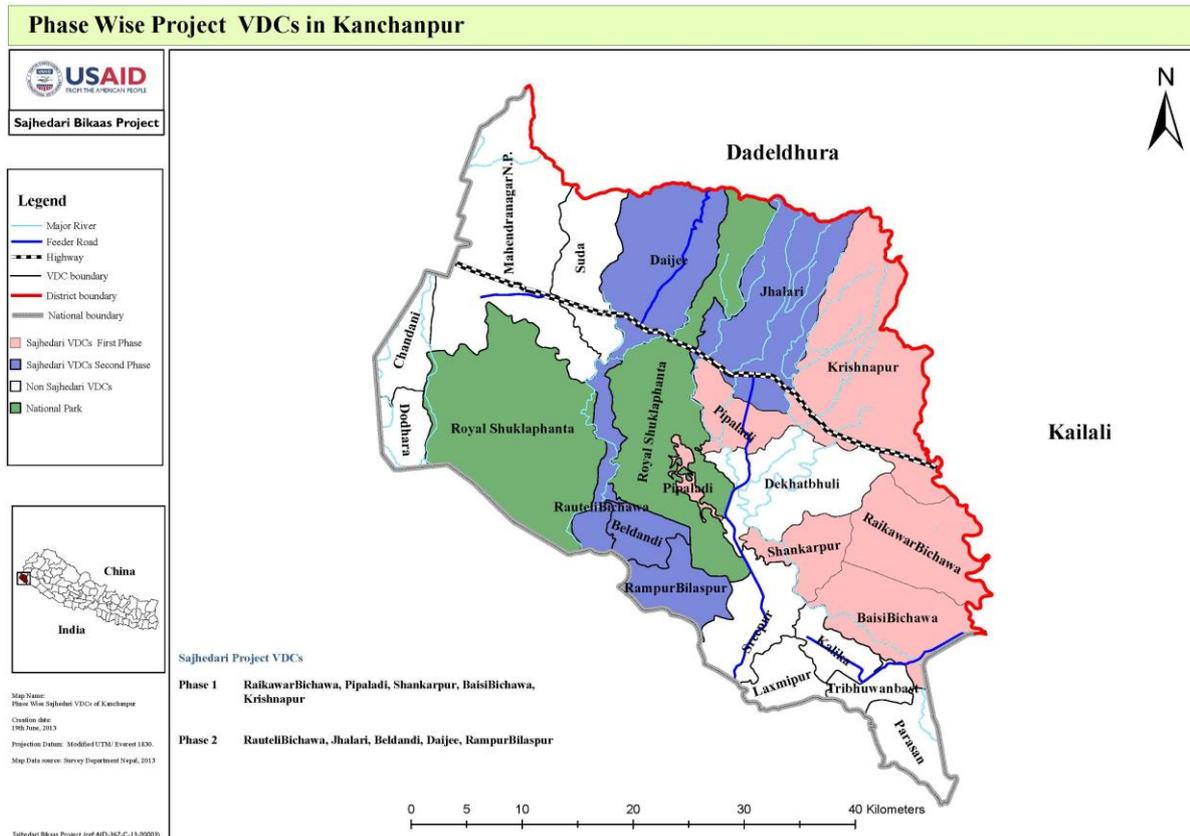
Youth in the region continue to be viewed as potential troublemakers, in particular because of the activities of political parties' youth wings. These groups are seen as instrumentalizing youth to serve the interests of the parties. Youth respondents themselves tended to agree with the view that political parties use them with little



concern for their own views. More affected by unemployment, young people are also seen as frequently involved in petty crime and more interested in quick money than hard work. On the other hand, many respondents also said that youth play a positive role in their communities through involvement in youth clubs and engaging with social and development issues.

2. Districts Assessment

Kanchanpur



Political tensions, conflicts and/or violence

Compared to six months before, many respondents felt that the political situation in Kanchanpur had become more lively and heated due to the preparations and campaigning for elections. As in other districts, political developments in Kanchanpur district centered on the upcoming elections to the Constituent Assembly (CA). Parties in the district were reportedly focusing their election-related efforts on internal organization and selecting candidates. The wider public was also aware of and involved in these internal party debates to some extent. Respondents also said that politicians had begun visiting different areas in the district to seek public support.

In general, respondents were unsure whether elections would be held as planned. Most said that the elections were unlikely to take place peacefully if the Communist Party of Nepal – Maoist (CPN-M) and the 33-party alliance opposed to elections continued to reject the process. Representatives of the local authorities expressed more confidence,

emphasizing that the government and major political parties supported the elections. According to them, any violent incidents would be small-scale and limited, and security forces would be able to keep the situation under control. They said that elections would go ahead even if they needed to be postponed (one said that this could be by a few days; another suggested elections might be postponed until early 2014).

The majority of respondents intended to vote if elections went ahead. Some respondents said that they would vote if the security situation is good.

Respondents believed the likelihood of violence would be determined mainly by whether or not the CPN-M continued to reject the elections. Although no major incidents were reported, most expected that some violence would occur. Some informants said that political parties' youth wings were likely to be involved in clashes during the campaign. One informant mentioned a fight that had occurred on the Shree Sidhanath Science Campus between student unions affiliated to the Nepal Congress (NC) and Unified Communist Party of Nepal (Maoist) (UCPN(M), which was brought under control by the police and did not result in any serious injuries.

Respondents had different views about how political parties are perceived in the district. Some said that perceptions were mostly mixed or neutral, while others believed that there was significant disillusion due to parties' failure to fulfil promises made at the last elections. One informant said that turnout at election campaign events was much lower than in the previous election, reflecting this disillusion.

Despite the presence of an inter-party women's alliance, women were reportedly poorly represented among candidates nominated by the political parties. Respondents said that women were not given priority in the process and were selected mainly to fill quotas.

Identity-based tensions, conflicts and/or violence

The dispute between Tharu and Pahadi communities over whether the district should be part of a Tharuhat state¹ or Undivided Far West (UFW) region continues to be a source of tension in Kanchanpur. While no major incidents of violence have occurred since the 32-day period of clashes in mid-2012, respondents said that relationships between the Tharu and Pahadis are “cold” and that tensions between the communities remained latent. Many expected the issue to resurface following CA elections when debates over a federal constitution would resume. As in the Rapid Conflict Assessment

¹ While most Tharu groups refer to the proposed region as Tharuhat, the UCPN(M) uses the term Tharuwan.

(RCA), respondents criticized political parties and leaders for exploiting tensions over this issue for their own interests.

Inter-caste disputes and discrimination against Dalits were described as prevalent in Kanchanpur district, taking the form of conflict over inter-caste marriages and discriminatory practices linked to untouchability. Some respondents said that these problems were decreasing in urban areas and among the younger generation. Some alleged that local authorities often fail to intervene in cases of discrimination against Dalits.

Conversion to Christianity was also mentioned as an issue affecting the district, occurring mainly among Dalits, Mukta Kamaiyas (former bonded laborers) and Rana Tharus. One respondent said that conversions within his own family had caused significant tensions in his household.

Crime and armed group-based tensions, conflicts and/or violence

The use of illegal drugs was the criminal activity most frequently mentioned by respondents (in contrast to the RCA, responses focused on consumption rather than trafficking of drugs). Cannabis (*chars*) was the main drug mentioned, along with illegal medicines available from India. Young men were said to be the main users, and are reportedly often involved in petty crime as a result. District-level authorities claimed that the activities of an organization which distributes syringes to drug users are worsening the problem.

The other main criminal activity cited was the trafficking of women from hill districts to work as prostitutes in India. Kanchanpur is an important transit point for this activity. Organizations in the district reportedly working to combat trafficking include Maiti Nepal, Santhi Sanstha, Serve Nepal and Sana Hatharu.

As in the RCA, the open border with India was described as a key cause of crime, allowing criminals to escape arrest and drugs and weapons to be smuggled in. Some respondents also said that people from the district were occasionally abducted and held in India for ransom; two respondents mentioned incidents that had taken place in the two months prior to the research.

While one respondent said burglaries had decreased, possibly thanks to increased activity by the police, others cited significant incidents that had occurred in recent months involving criminal groups. Groups reportedly robbed a number of houses on four different occasions in the last six to twelve months.

Other security issues, including sexual and gender-based violence

Similarly to the RCA, respondents mentioned the prevalence of violence against women, mainly rape and domestic violence, and the high suicide rate in the district. Some respondents thought that violence against women was on the increase, but others said that it was the reporting of such cases that had gone up. Some respondents suggested that alcohol abuse was a cause of violence against women. Perpetrators of rape are reportedly often from the victim's family or community, and victims tend to be stigmatized by the community. Several cases were mentioned in which children were the victims of rape.

Nepal Police's Women and Children Service Centres were seen as capable of dealing with cases of violence against women, but respondents also felt that they had too little resources and that not everyone would get justice. The Nepal Bar Association reportedly provides free legal assistance to women victims of violence, and NGOs are also active in awareness-raising. The district Women's Development Office has a safe house for women victims. Respondents said that many cases are still resolved through mediation or payments to victims rather than through the justice system.

The discriminatory practice of *chaupadi* (isolating women from households during menstruation) was perceived as having significantly decreased, including as a result of a campaign against it by communities. Nevertheless, respondents highlighted a number of cases in which women in the *chaupadi* huts were harassed or raped, in one case in Jhalari Village Development Committee (VDC) by what appears to be an organised criminal group.

Some respondents also mentioned that individuals are sometimes subject to violence due to accusations of witchcraft, but that these cases had become less common. One case reportedly occurred in the Tharu community two to three months before the research.

Resource-based tensions, conflicts and/or violence

As in the RCA, respondents mentioned timber smuggling from forests in the district, as well as perceived encroachment on Nepali land along the border by Indian authorities and farmers, tensions over the use of river and forest resources by landless people (*sukumbasis*), and illegal quarrying of sand and stone from the Chure Hills causing landslides and flooding.

Timber smuggling was the most frequently cited issue. Respondents said that unemployed youth are largely involved, and some also alleged that employees of the

Forest Office and members of Community Forest User Groups and political parties are complicit in smuggling. Timber smuggling was reported to be greater in Sripur, Sankarpur, Beldadi and Krishnapur VDCs as well as around Suklaphanta wildlife reserve.

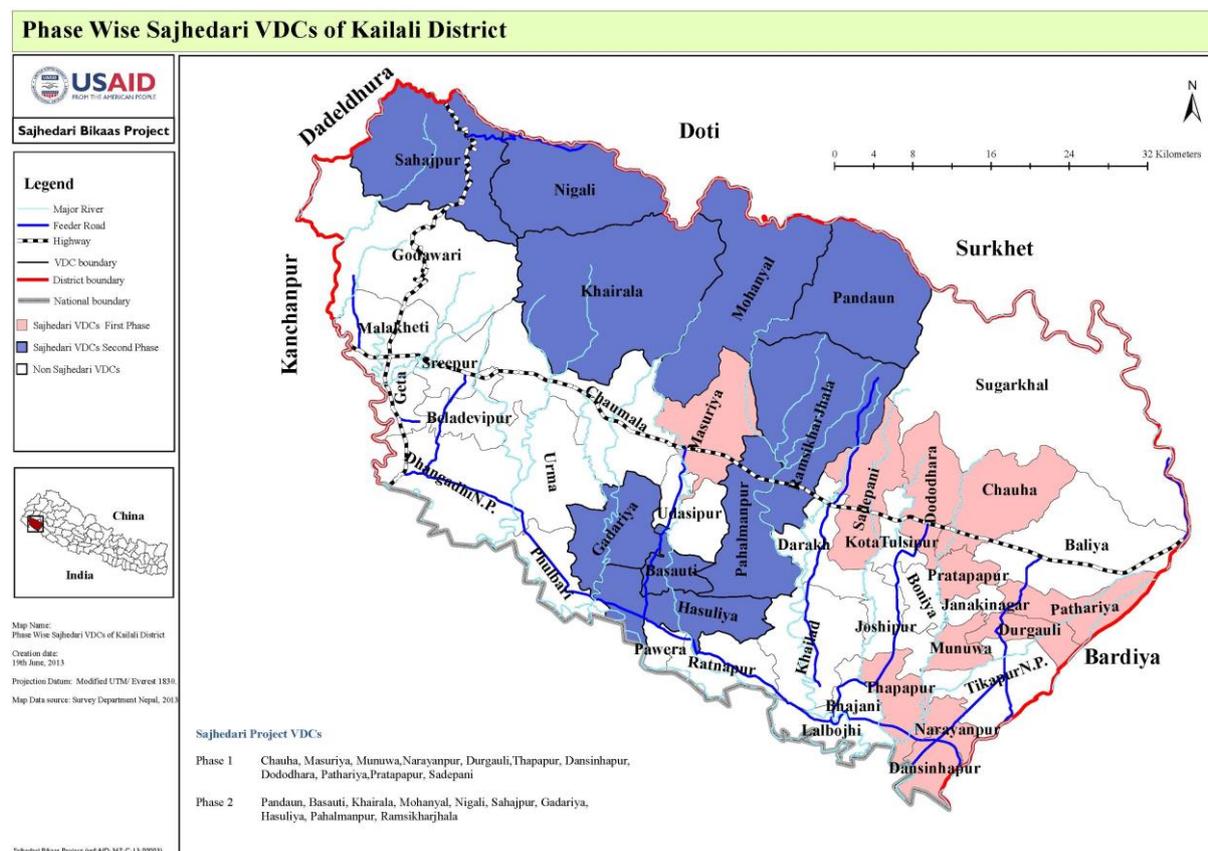
The role of youth in tensions, conflicts and/or violence

Young people are significantly affected by the major social and political issues mentioned by respondents in Kanchanpur. Youth members of political parties play a key role in political activism, and have also been primary actors in the clashes between supporters of a Tharuhat state and a UFW region. Youth also suffer to a greater extent from the lack of employment opportunities, and are more likely to emigrate or to become involved in illegal activities such as timber smuggling or drug and alcohol use as a result.

On the other hand, youth respondents themselves also pointed to their positive commitment to social and development activism, including working against alcohol abuse and deforestation, and their more progressive attitude to discriminatory social traditions such as *chaupadi*. One informant also described youth as more aware and willing to demand their rights when dealing with government authorities.

Local authorities felt that in comparison to other districts, youth groups in Kanchanpur were less engaged in social issues and cooperation with the police to reduce crime. According to a youth respondent, relations between youth and the police are characterized by suspicion, with police tending to see youth as troublemakers, and youth viewing the police as corrupt.

Kailali



Political tensions, conflicts and/or violence

Respondents in Kailali reported that political debates were beginning to intensify in the run-up to the elections. The question of whether or not elections should go ahead dominated discussions in the district. Political parties were mainly working to organize themselves internally, selecting candidates and mobilizing their local membership. Some informants said that the parties had also started campaigning in the wider community. In particular, the parties' youth members were reportedly active in debating and mobilizing support.

Many expressed uncertainty over whether elections would take place, given the opposition of the 33-party alliance led by the CPN-M and the resulting tensions. Several respondents said that if the CPN-M did not take part and tensions persisted, the outcome of the elections would not be positive even if they went ahead. Other informants, including a representative from the local authorities, were more positive, emphasizing that people wanted the elections and had worked hard to hold them.

Decisions by political leaders at the central level to support or oppose the elections were seen as key to the conduct of actors in the district.

The majority of respondents consulted said they intended to vote if elections are held, although many also said they would decide whether or not to vote according to the security situation. Widespread intimidation to dissuade people from voting was mentioned. A small minority of informants said they would not vote because they had lost trust in the political parties.

No violent incidents related to the elections were reported in Kailali. However, many respondents expected violence to occur as elections grew closer, including intimidation of voters and clashes between supporters of rival parties. Tensions stemming from the CPN-M's opposition to the elections were seen as the primary factor that could cause violence. One informant pointed out that the CPN-M is supported by a number of Maoist ex-combatants who have the ability to cause significant disruptions. He said that there were armed groups of CPN-M supporters in Lamki. Several informants expected members of parties' youth wings to be at the forefront of any clashes. Youth and CSO representatives from Kailali reported that they had received or heard about threats and intimidation aimed at preventing people from voting, or at ensuring that they would vote for the 'right' party. These incidents reportedly occurred in villages in the district and involved implicit as well as explicit threats of violence, including the use of weapons, against those who vote.

Some respondents said that the ongoing rivalry between supporters of a Tharuhat state and those in favour of UFW have been and could continue to be a source of tension during the elections. They cited protests and the burning of a *putla* (effigy) of Prachanda by UFW supporters following the remarks in favour of a Tharuhat state by high-level leaders from the UCPN(M) and the Terai Madhesh Loktantrik Party. Others also pointed to tensions within parties over the process of selecting candidates, as well as between political parties over the local balance of power. One respondent particularly highlighted that in his view the likelihood of inter-party clashes was higher than during the last CA elections in 2008, as the balance of power has changed in the district. In his view, the NC and Communist Party of Nepal (Unified Marxist-Leninist) (CPN-UML) have gained power since the first CA election, while the UCPN(M) has become weaker due to the split with the CPN-M.

Regarding ways to prevent violence, some respondents said that party leaders at the center had a decisive role in affecting events at the local level. One suggestion was that postponing elections until early 2014 would allow time to negotiate with the opposed parties (especially the CPN-M) and secure their participation. Some respondents highlighted the positive role CSOs had played in May 2012 to mitigate tensions and said

that by training youth in local-level mediation local tensions could be reduced. Similarly, an informant from civil society suggested that CSOs could also play a mediating role, but also pointed out that their influence was secondary to that of the parties.

Identity-based tensions, conflicts and/or violence

Communities in Kailali remain polarized along ethnic lines between Tharus and Pahadis as a result of the violent clashes that erupted in mid-2012 between Tharus supporting the creation of a Tharuhat federal state and Pahadis supporting the rival Undivided Far West (UFW) movement (described more fully in the Rapid Conflict Assessment). While no violence has taken place in recent months, respondents said that tensions were likely to rise again if the issue of federalism becomes a topic of political debate again following the Constituent Assembly elections. Protests had recently occurred in the district over statements made by some party leaders about the issue (see above), and new political parties have emerged based around the rival claims to federal states.

VDCs that were named as potential hotspots for identity-based tensions or violence included Pahalmanpur, Phulwari, Chuha, Hasuliya, Partappur, Baliya and Bouniya, where there are large populations from both communities. Some respondents felt that the situation in Dhangadi municipality was worse than in the VDCs. Respondents mentioned that civil society groups including INSEC and the Nepal Red Cross had made efforts to mediate between the groups and reduce violence. Perceptions of the neutrality of the media, local government and police varied among respondents, although one informant pointed out that it was very difficult for organizations to gain the trust of both sides because of the polarized environment.

Respondents mentioned several civil society groups that have been working to mitigate tensions in Kailali, including INSEC, the Bar Association, WOREC and the Nepal Red Cross, which is also providing psycho-social counselling for conflict victims in the district.

Crime and armed group-based tensions, conflict and/or violence

As in the RCA, the main crimes reported in the district are drug use together with associated petty crime, and smuggling in small arms and drugs through the open border with India. According to the district Superintendent of Police (SP), the drug trade in the district is carried out by individuals rather than organized groups. Many respondents reported that crime had decreased in recent months as a result of effective action by the police, including campaigns to curb the drug trade and prostitution in local hotels and bars. The current SP, who was recently posted to Kailali, was well regarded by respondents.

Respondents also said that women from Kailali or western hill districts are trafficked through the border to work in India or the Gulf, often leading to sexual exploitation. This is facilitated by brokers who are often acquaintances and are able to gain the trust of their victims. The organization, Maiti Nepal is working to rescue victims, and WOREC provides them with counselling.

Several respondents mentioned the presence of Maoist ex-combatants in the district, who they consider as likely to become involved in crime because they have access to weapons and lack the skills to gain their livelihood through other means.

Other security issues, including sexual and gender-based violence

Some respondents said that cases of violence against women are increasing in the district, which was also a view expressed in the RCA. Rapes are often perpetrated against young girls by members of their families or acquaintances. Domestic violence was also mentioned as a major problem, particularly among poor or marginalized groups and in rural areas. The WOREC coordinator in the district provided statistics showing an increase in domestic violence cases since 2011. Alarmingly, respondents highlighted the fact that activists campaigning against violence against women had been threatened.

The district police stated that although in the past the police had been unsure how to deal with domestic violence, procedures for dealing with such cases were now more clearly established. They also said that a Women and Children Service Centre was being built outside the police office, and that women were increasingly willing to approach the police to raise their problems. However, one NGO activist described police resources to deal with domestic violence as limited and suggested cases were not always handled properly. She also said that women victims of violence were usually reluctant to take their cases to court. Other respondents also said that access to the justice system was too costly and time-consuming for victims, and cited cases where perpetrators with political connections were protected from prosecution. Civil society activists suggested that a more sensitive approach needs to be followed when taking action against prostitution, not only punishing the (mainly female) sex workers.

Resource-based tensions/conflicts

Timber smuggling from local forests is widespread. Local youths are reportedly involved in smuggling with the collaboration of employees of the Forest Office. Some respondents said that smuggling has been reduced by the creation of Community Forest User Groups in the district.

One respondent also mentioned that political parties had been imposing a levy on sand and stone quarried from the Kutiya river banks, but that this practice has recently been stopped.

Tensions in Kailali relating to the occupation of land and the allocation of land to landless people by the authorities were discussed in the Rapid Conflict Assessment. However, respondents in this survey largely did not mention this issue.

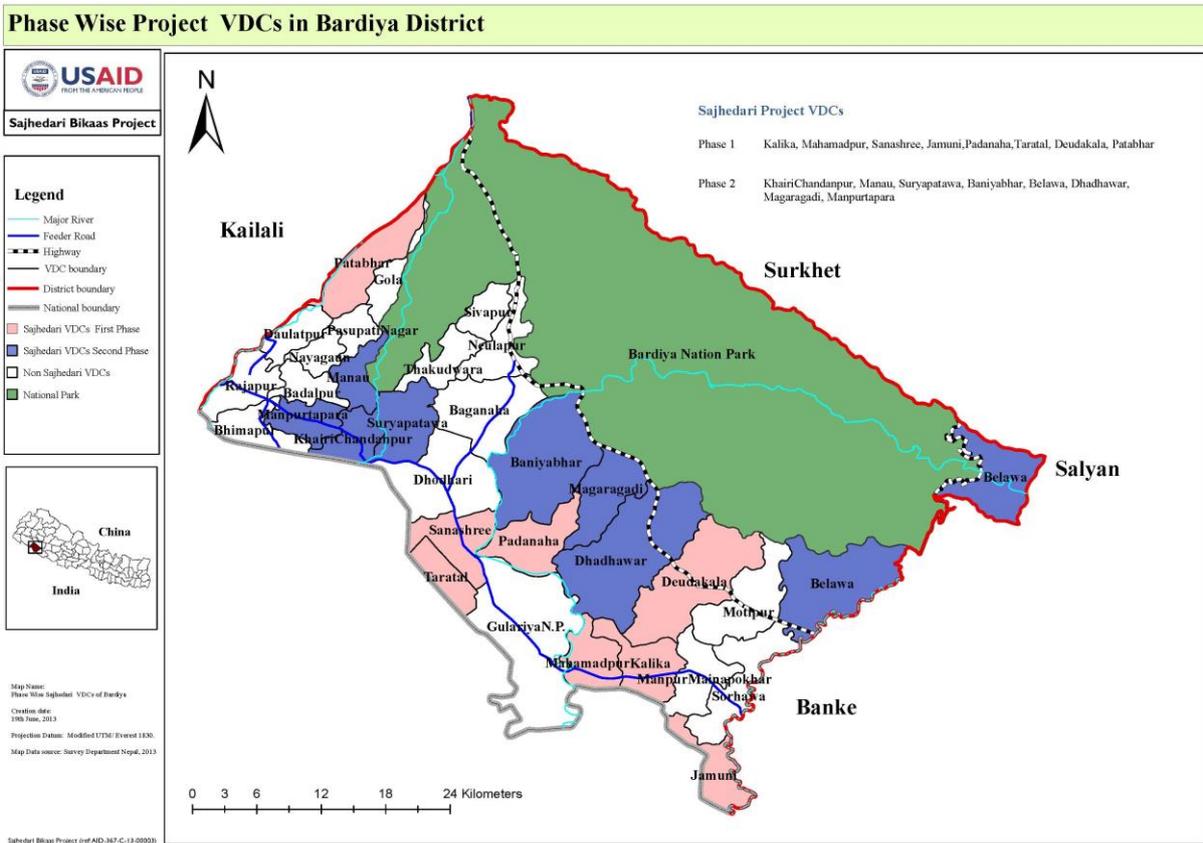
The role of youth in tensions, conflict and/or violence

When discussing the position of youth in the district, respondents emphasized that young people played both positive and negative roles. Local youth wings of political parties play a significant part in local tensions, as they have been the main actors in clashes between political groups. College campuses are affected by their activities, and youth wings are also used to create pressure on elections to local bodies such as school committees.

On the other hand, several respondents also pointed to the increasing involvement of young people in civil society groups and NGOs as a positive development. The work of the organizations, CeLLRd and Rural Women Development, which have trained young people from the district in mediation to address local tensions, were mentioned positively in that regard.

Young people are reportedly more likely to be unemployed. Many see unemployment as a key factor that leads youth to become involved in criminal activities. According to the District Development Committee (DDC) office vocational training opportunities are available; youth respondents themselves however complained of a lack of training opportunities and skills-based education. Youth respondents also talked about a significant generation gap between them and their parents, including differences over relationships and career choices and the tendency of families to give priorities to sons over daughters.

Bardiya



Political tensions, conflicts and/or violence

As in other districts, respondents said that the election campaign so far in Bardiya had mainly involved party members and their youth wings, who were engaged in the process of selecting their election candidates. Some informants mentioned that politicians had visited villages in the district and that leaders had come from Kathmandu to seek support.

Respondents in Bardiya mostly expected that elections would take place as planned. One respondent suggested that postponing the elections would only cause more problems. Some discussion participants said that holding elections would be an important step towards resolving issues remaining from the armed conflict, and that their success would be in the interest of the country. Youth respondents tended to have a more skeptical view, saying that voting would not change things and expressing disappointment with political parties. Despite this, most said they intended to vote if the security situation permitted it.

No major incidents of violence were reported, although one respondent mentioned that “people had been beaten up”. Respondents generally expected sporadic violence to occur because of the opposition to the elections of the CPN-M and allied parties. One informant pointed to the fact that many Maoist ex-combatants and Young Communist League (YCL) members support the CPN-M, and suggested they are likely to try and disrupt the elections. The informant also said that weapons were available to such groups across the border in India. Types of violent incidents expected included attacks on voting booths and attacks or kidnappings targeting candidates. Some informants expressed concern about reports that the military would be deployed to secure the elections, noting that they had perpetrated abuses against the population during the armed conflict. One said that people in the district could end up being the target of intimidation from both sides, whether they voted in the elections or not.

Some respondents suggested that ethnic tensions in the district between supporters and opponents of a Tharuhat federal state could be a source of conflict during the elections, but several others thought this was more likely to become a major issue after elections take place. One respondent also said that Indian criminal gangs could attack individual candidates who they opposed.

Identity-based tensions, conflicts and/or violence

The underlying tensions between the Tharu and Pahadi communities in the district identified in the RCA continue to exist. While these tensions have not resulted in any clashes, respondents believed that they could increase if debates on federalism are resumed following the election of a new CA.

Tensions between Pahadis and Madhesis were also mentioned. The activities of Madhesi armed groups in the past (described below in section on crime and armed groups), while viewed by respondents as largely criminal in nature, also have an identity-related dimension as they reportedly targeted Pahadi homes and businesses, especially in Gulariya municipality.

Although relations between Bardiya’s Muslim population and other groups were generally described as normal, one incident from the previous year mentioned by respondents suggests that inter-religious relations are sensitive. Muslims from Mohammadpur VDC protested in the streets after a local newspaper quoted a police official referring to their area as a “Pakistani neighborhood”. Tensions were calmed after the newspaper’s editor apologized. Inter-religious marriages can also cause tensions, particularly if a Muslim woman marries a Hindu man.

Discrimination against Dalits and the practice of untouchability reportedly continue to exist. One informant from an organization working for the rights of ‘third gender’ people discussed the situation of this group in Bardiya. Although prejudice and discrimination against ‘third gender’ individuals persists, their participation in public life is increasingly accepted by society and their treatment by the authorities has improved.

HIV-positive people are another group who reportedly face prejudice in their communities. Respondents indicated that some of them were infected with the virus while working in India.

Crime and armed group-based conflicts, tension and/or violence

Crime in Bardiya is largely linked to the district’s location on the border with India, as highlighted in the RCA. Respondents mentioned the consumption of drugs, reporting that users were mostly young men, often in their teens, and identifying Sanushri, Jamuni and Deudakala VDCs as areas where this was most prevalent. Jamuni, Balegaun, Kalika and Ganeshpur were identified as transit points for smuggling. Cannabis is smuggled from Nepal to India, while other drugs including medicines are smuggled in the other direction. Women are frequently employed as porters to smuggle drugs.

Another key criminal activity that takes place through the border is the trafficking of women to work in India. This has reportedly increased in Bardiya as a result of tighter controls on the border at Nepalgunj. The areas around Rajapur, Taratal, Jamuni, Gulariya and Sanoshri were mentioned as the most frequently used transit points for trafficking women to India from different places in Nepal.

Armed groups based across the border have reportedly been active in the district, carrying out kidnappings, bombings and extortion from businesses. While these groups’ activities were viewed as criminal in nature, as stated above they are also linked to identity tensions as they are Madhesi and target Pahadis. Informants mentioned factions of the Janatantrik Terai Mukti Morcha (JTMM) including groups led by Rajan Mukti, Jaikrishna Goite, Jwala Singh and Bhagat Singh. Some informants said that armed group violence had decreased following the detention of members of the Rajan Mukti group.

Respondents expressed varying opinions about trends in the crime rate. Some, including the district police office, said crime in general had increased. As mentioned above, trafficking of women was specifically mentioned as having increased, while on the other hand some informants said that armed group violence has decreased. One

informant also said minor thefts by drug users in Gulariya municipality had been reduced in the past 18 months.

Other security issues, including sexual and gender-based violence

As in the RCA, a high rate of domestic violence and rape was reported in the district. Reporting of domestic violence by victims is increasing according to some respondents. One woman activist even said that “no house is free of violence against women”. Victims of rape are mostly teenage girls, and the perpetrators are frequently family members or neighbors. Respondents said that the police usually encourage cases of rape or domestic violence to be settled by the community or through payments instead of prosecuting perpetrators.

Victims of domestic violence or rape who speak out reportedly risk being ostracized by their families and society, and have difficulties securing their livelihoods. The government provides legal aid and a shelter where victims can stay, while the police also has four Women and Children Service Centre that can handle cases. However, women can only stay in the shelter for one month, and some informants also described the complexity of the procedures for access to the justice system and legal aid as a barrier to women. Respondents also pointed to the challenges and security risks single women are facing in society.

As in other districts, respondents were alarmed by an increasing number of suicide cases. Domestic violence and mistreatment by family members were seen as main reasons for women in particular committing suicide.

The population of Bardiya district continues to be affected by the after-effects of the armed conflict period, and several respondents highlighted the impact of conflict on their own lives. Women whose husbands had died during the conflict described their isolation from their communities and precarious livelihoods. Respondents also discussed the issue of the hundreds of people who were detained during the conflict and disappeared, largely men from the Tharu community. Several organizations have been established by victims of the conflict to work for their cause.

Respondents complained about harassment of Nepalis by Indian border officials, and also mentioned an incident that occurred shortly before this research was carried out where Indian police carried out operations in Gulariya municipality without permission from Nepali authorities.

Resource-based tensions, conflicts and/or violence

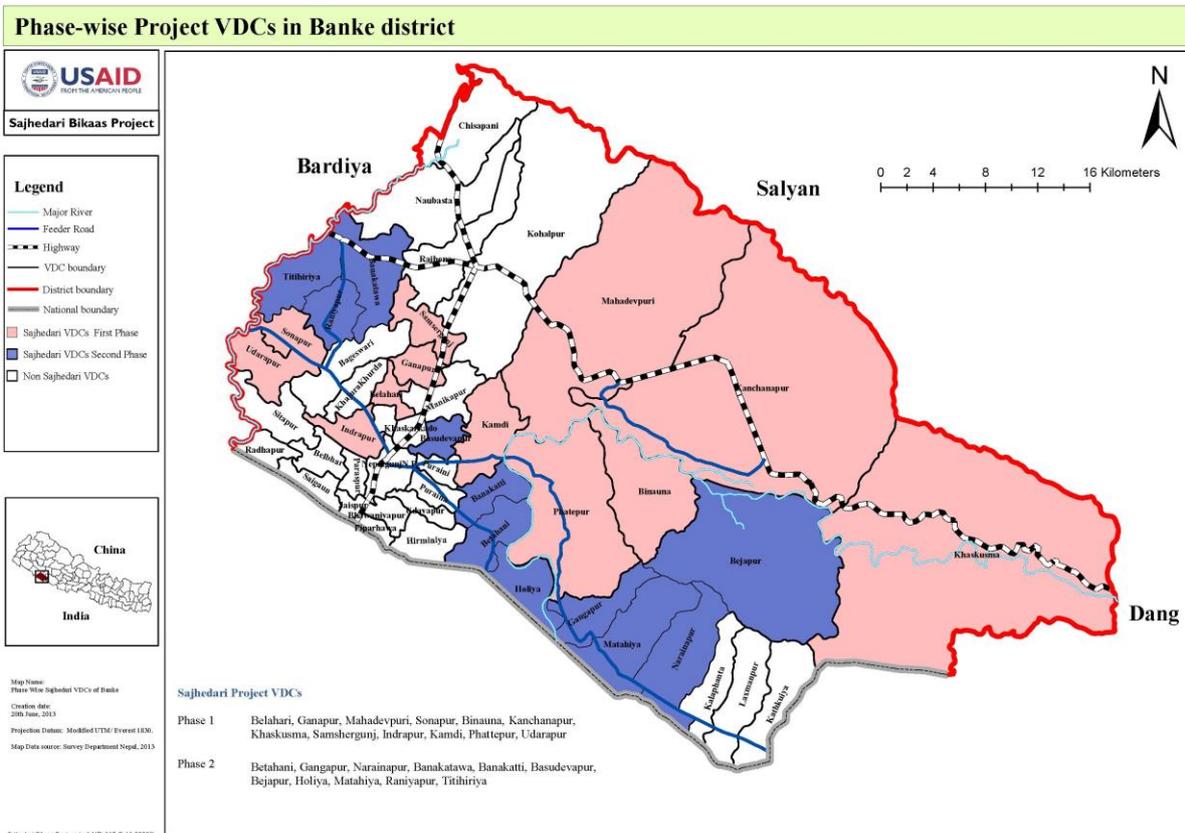
The presence of squatters near forest areas, already highlighted in the RCA, was cited as a cause of deforestation and sometimes tension with nearby communities who object to logging by the squatters. The squatters include landless migrants from neighboring districts, others who have lost land as a result of flooding, and communities of ex-bonded laborers.

Respondents also mentioned timber smuggling from community forests, which occurs with the collusion of Community Forest User Group members and employees of the Forest Office.

The role of youth in tensions, conflicts and/or violence

Respondents said that youth were more likely to be unemployed, and also mentioned their involvement in political parties' youth wings. Youth respondents themselves emphasized their commitment to working on social issues and development, but said that their efforts were not always fully supported by the community.

Banke



Political tension, conflict and/or violence

The upcoming CA elections were described as the most significant and anticipated political event that was the focus of political party cadres in the district. The more frequent and heated debates around the elections were the biggest change observed in the district compared to 6 months ago. All political forces taking part in the elections were gearing up and making necessary preparations. Political forces opposed to the elections (the CPN-M, leading an alliance of 33 fringe parties) were also making preparations to disrupt the upcoming polls. Key informants voiced concerns about the CPN-M's violent past and their ability not just to disrupt the polls but also to have a negative and lasting impact on the security situation.

Although there was no mention of any significant political clashes or tensions in the district, key informants mentioned some tensions within parties over the nomination of candidates for the upcoming polls. Reportedly, aspiring candidates within all parties were fiercely competing to secure their respective parties' candidacy. Following the nomination of candidates by the parties, many anticipated some level of tension to

ensue. Tension or clashes could occur between rival candidates running for election, as well as between those in favor of the polls and those opposing them.

The involvement of youth wings in the upcoming elections was cited as a major security concern. According to one key informant, political parties publicly declared their intention to mobilize groups of 10 to 100 youth affiliates at every polling booth. Whether or not this is carried out, the involvement of youth during the elections was expected to be significant. Many key informants believed that the parties would mobilize youth for campaigning and that aggressive behavior by youths could potentially lead to clashes between opposing camps.

One key informant related a conversation he had with an election candidate who said that encounters with candidates of other parties were likely during the campaigning period in which both sides would have a number of youth supporters with them. In such an encounter, the candidate said he would opt for confrontation rather than retreating and potentially being labelled as a coward. Citing this example, the key informant believed that the number of clashes between rival candidates could rise in the lead-up to elections.

Identity-based tensions, conflicts and/or violence

Respondents did not indicate an increase in tensions between the various identity groups in Banke. Some believed that relationships between the identity groups had improved over the last six months. According to one key informant, identity tensions have calmed down since the dissolution of the CA. At the same time, the issue of identity still remains a major concern for many in the district, who affirmed that Banke remained a very sensitive district due to the previous clashes between Hindus and Muslims in 2008 as well as between Pahadis and Madhesis. Some key informants were concerned that simple disputes and political issues could become identity issues and create tensions resulting in clashes between groups. The upcoming elections could reignite identity tensions, as communities are likely to be mobilised behind parties with opposing positions on identity-based federal structures.

As in the RCA, many in the district lauded an existing mechanism that brings together leaders from different religions in a forum to ensure inter-religious harmony in the district. Reportedly, Hindu, Muslim, Buddhist and Christian religious leaders were all part of this group. Unlike in the RCA, there was no mention of potential political or identity-based tensions over secularism versus Hinduism despite the upcoming CA elections.

Crime and armed group-based tensions, conflicts and/or violence

There were mixed opinions about the level of crime in the district. Some believed that it had gone down while others believed that it had increased. Many key informants who believed that the criminal activities had decreased attributed the decrease to the previous District Chief of the Nepal Police. Many informants praised his performance. Some said that he was so strict that people would not even dare to smoke in public places, while others highlighted his contribution in greatly reducing the threats of underground criminal groups in the district.

Other security issues, including sexual and gender-based violence

While a number of key informants believed that rape had decreased, the police affirmed that the number of registered rape cases had increased. Some informants mentioned that women and girls from impoverished backgrounds were more prone to sexual and gender-based violence. Several key informants also said that women are insecure when travelling outside their home at night. According to them, the presence of gangs of youth causes them to fear being harassed, robbed and even physically molested if they venture out. Sexual harassment was also mentioned as a factor that makes women insecure.

As Banke is a border district, some key informants mentioned that cross-border criminal activities are still prevalent in the district. Smuggling of illegal drugs and merchandise (customs evasion) are also common. Respondents perceive youth from impoverished backgrounds as more susceptible to substance abuse and criminal activity. Cases of kidnapping have reportedly decreased, but a few key informants believed that drug-related crimes had surged.

Other concerns/issues mentioned by key informants in the district include mistreatment of migrant workers returning from India by security personnel at the border checkpoints, even being drugged and robbed. As it is generally known that such migrants carry all their earnings when they return and often have various goods for the home and family, they are easy prey for robbery.

Resource-based tensions, conflicts and/or violence

Resource-based tensions have remained at a low level, and largely unchanged in the last six months. Some informants did not believe that tensions over resources were a key concern in Banke. However, it was reported that people from neighboring districts are moving to Banke as it is a major urban center with better education, employment and

health care facilities. Although there was no mention of tensions between the natives and the newcomers, the influx of people has caused the price of land to rise and increased competition over available resources such as water and electricity. Landless squatters in the district were mentioned as a major problem by the local authorities. According to the authorities, they are not genuinely landless because they have migrated from other districts where they had land and property. The key informant said that in Kohalpur area the “land mafia”² is working with these landless claimants to capture government land. He stated that the government was unlikely to do anything about it now that elections are scheduled, because these people are vote banks for the parties and they will not want to sour their relations with this constituency.

The role of youth in tensions, conflicts and/or violence

Respondents frequently highlighted the involvement of youth in negative social and political trends. Increasing numbers of youths in the district are reportedly involved in drug abuse and drug trafficking. According to youth respondents, drugs consumed include “brown sugar”,³ hashish, marijuana, and *gutka*.⁴ Respondents also said that youth are involved in gang fights in the district. The main security concern for youth, however, was unemployment. Despite the unemployment rate, however, interest in the agriculture sector among youth is reportedly dwindling, and they are more inclined to seek employment opportunities abroad. As a result, many youth have moved abroad, and many families now want their children to go abroad even if they themselves want to remain in the country and work.

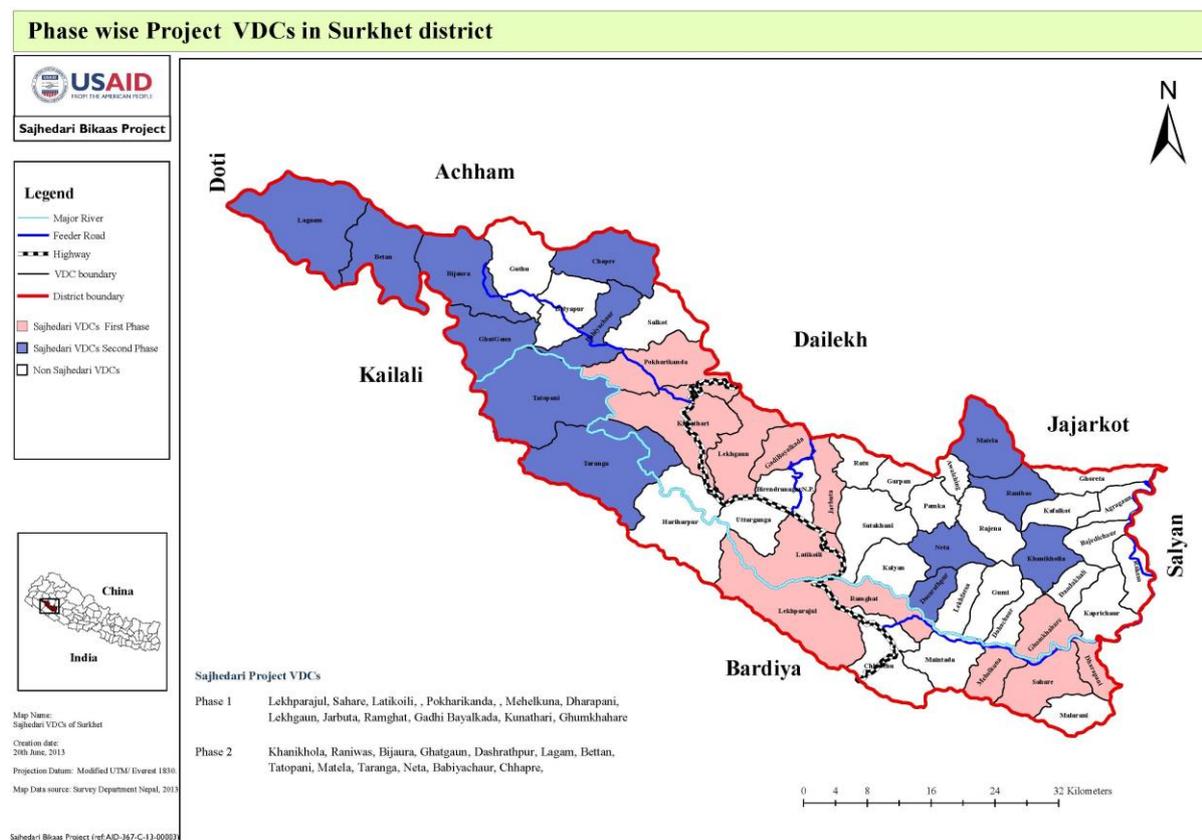
Youth are inclined to join political parties, and are susceptible to exploitation by political groups according to key informants. Youth respondents, however, said that for them affiliation to political parties was a way of achieving security. Madhesi, Muslim and Tharu youth were highlighted as groups particularly at risk. On the other hand, the positive contributions of youth were also highlighted. Key informants mentioned that youth are more knowledgeable and socially active. They are more skilled in using the internet and more engaged in internet-related activities. Many youth are also involved in politics and aspire to do well in society. Youth are also active in the media sector, NGOs and human rights organizations.

² “Land mafia” is a term frequently used in Nepal to refer to individuals or groups buying and selling land through illegal means; for example, selling somebody else’s land by producing fake documents or coercing individuals to buy or sell land by physically threatening them.

³ An adulterated form of heroin.

⁴ A mixture of betel nut, tobacco, catechu, paraffin and slaked lime that is used as a stimulant but has negative effects on health.

Surkhet



Political tension, conflict and/or violence

Politically, Surkhet district is fairly calm and no overt tensions or clashes between different political forces were reported. Tensions between political forces remained unchanged in the last six months according to a majority of informants, and no significant confrontations were reported. Informants stated that the upcoming CA elections were the only reason behind increased political activity in the district, This consisted mainly of election preparations by political parties, including selecting candidates, publishing their manifestos and campaigning. However, informants also expressed concern that the CPN-M's opposition to elections and their ongoing preparation to disrupt the polls could be heading for a collision with the determination of the government and other participating parties to conduct elections. A number of key informants felt that CPN-M has significant sway in the mid-western districts and did have the capability to disrupt the CA elections.

Identity-based tensions, conflicts and/or violence

Similarly to the RCA, many informants asserted that the relationship between various

identity groups in Surkhet is harmonious. Most of the key informants interviewed stated that the situation had remained unchanged in the last six months; tensions had neither escalated nor decreased and there had been no clashes. However, informants brought up the case of Kakrebihar, where the local authorities had denied the Buddhist community permission to erect a statue of Buddha (see also RCA). As narrated by key informants, this issue began when forest authorities denied the Buddhist group the right to erect the statue, as forest law prohibits any group from placing anything in government-owned forests. However, the group resorted to *bandahs* and even made this a national issue by taking it to the capital. Some even believed that the group was seeking to take the case to an international court. Given the Buddhists' determination to erect the statue other groups, especially the Hindu majority, began to oppose their plans. Tension over this issue has now reportedly died down.

Unlike in the RCA, caste-based tensions were not specifically highlighted in this assessment.

Crime and armed group-based tensions, conflicts and/or violence

Crime in the district was perceived by most respondents to have been on the rise in the last six-month period. Informants mostly referred to a rise in robbery, burglary, rape and suicide cases. Drug abuse by youth was also cited as a major problem in Surkhet. According to one informant, crime rises alongside the development of society. He asserted that crimes were the same but that techniques had changed, referring to the use of technology to commit crimes. He cited the sending of threatening messages/calls and extorting people using mobile phones as an example.

Reportedly youth are most involved in criminal activity. There are several reasons behind their involvement. First, youth are apparently most interested in entertainment. According to a key informant, youth seek *manoranjan* (entertainment), mobiles and motorbikes. As most youth are unable to afford all these, they resort to crime to acquire these items. Drug abuse is another reason that has contributed to the rise in crime. Drug users are engaged in robberies and burglaries so that they can procure their drugs. Youth are also most familiar with technology and use their knowledge of technology to commit crimes. Crimes are reportedly most frequent in urban and market areas.

The police in the district also attributed the surge in crime to unemployment, which compels some to resort to crime in order to make ends meet. However, the police also pointed to the diverse and mixed community of people as another reason behind the surge. As many people in the district are migrants from other districts and lack solidarity or communal bonds, it is easier for criminals to commit crime and go undetected as people are less bothered about others' property.

Other security issues, including sexual and gender-based violence

Similarly to the RCA, respondents felt that women in the district were prone to sexual and gender-based violence. There was a perception that it was unsafe for women to venture out after dark. Key informants also mentioned the prevalence of marriages between children/adolescents in the district. According to a key informant, many children are not in touch with their parents and are believed to have eloped. Those who elope are girls and boys aged between 13 and 14. When such cases happen, the parents generally do not inform security providers.

Another alarming issue in Surkhet was the high number of suicide rates. According to the police, there had been 20 cases of suicide in 15 days. It was difficult to ascertain why the suicide rate is so high in the district, as even the police could not provide explanations. The police admitted that they are unable to properly investigate this issue due to resource constraints, along with the difficulty for the investigators to revisit cases after some time has elapsed. They stated that it is difficult to question the family and others related to suicide victims, and crucial evidence is difficult to obtain as the body of the deceased is already cremated. They believe, however, that people are committing suicide due to underdevelopment and economic deprivation. “During festivals in particular, the impoverished families get hit the most. As they are unable to cope with the inadequacy and there is no income, they are compelled to make ends meet. Husbands have to bring and provide and wives can’t manage without the husband’s support. Plus, some husbands are spending their income on alcohol and the families are left with nothing. Love affair-related suicides are also on the rise.” Hanging and poison consumption were reportedly the two most common methods of suicide.

Resource-based tensions, conflicts and/or violence

Unlike in the RCA, no major tensions and clashes over resources were reported in Surkhet; where there are tensions they are local and not on a scale that warrants national attention and response. One informant referred to sporadic cases such as disputes between two wards on the usage of water sources and forests, and disputes over exploitation of stone and sand quarries. According to the informant, it is mainly the ultra-poor who extract sand and rocks from the rivers and try to transport them. The authorities frequently try to halt such illegal quarrying activities, which can cause tense situations. However, no major conflicts resulting from such disputes were reported in the district.

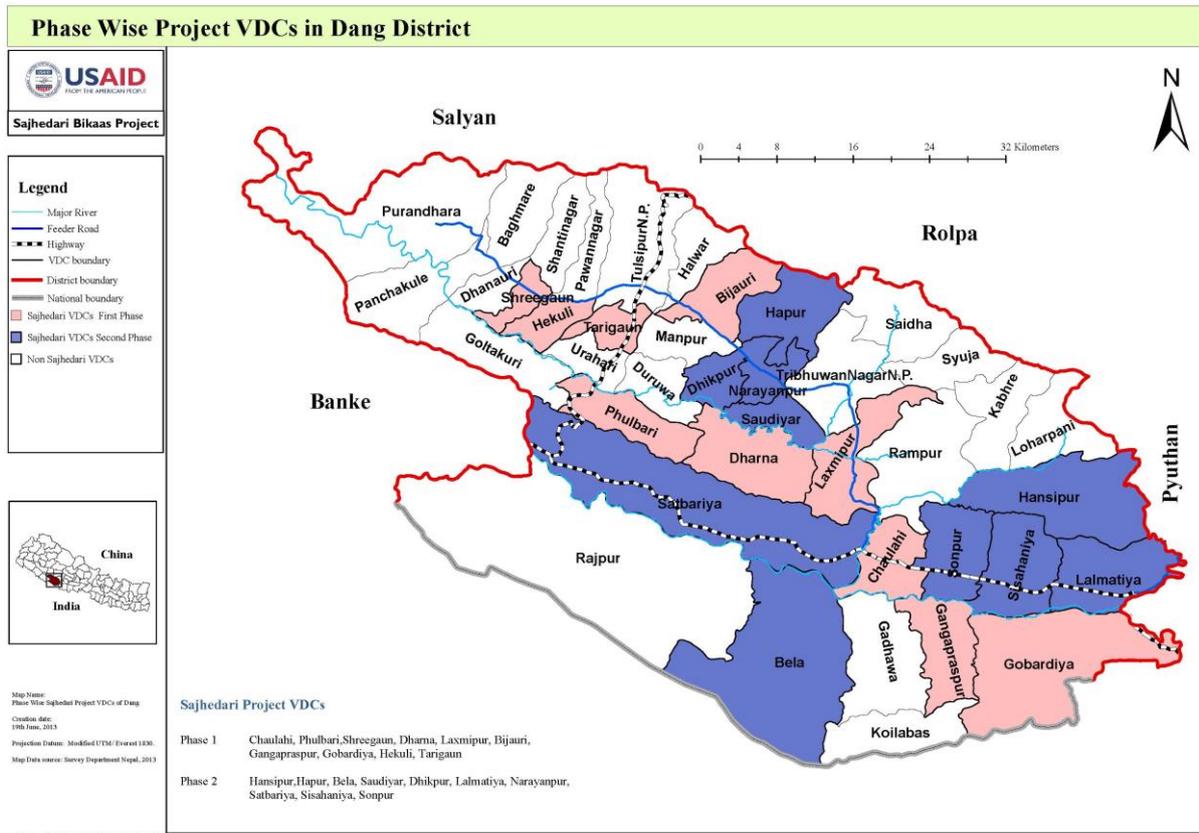
The role of youth in tensions, conflicts and/or violence

Unemployment and drug abuse are reportedly the two major problems for youth in the district. Due to unemployment, many youth are resorting to criminal activity and drugs. Many also go abroad to seek employment.

There were also several positive aspects to youths' role in the district. One informant observed that youth in the district are more engaged in music, dancing, acting, and anchoring in local radio stations. They have better knowledge of the internet and technology and are also interested in sports activities.

Youth had a different a perspective about themselves. They mentioned the generational gap between them and their parents' generation. They felt that they were misunderstood, not acknowledged by their elders and looked down upon. According to a youth respondent, "society does not trust youth even if they are educated. We are respecting our elderly people. They should listen to our opinion. Our society does not have to ask youth. In any program, if big people talk there is note taking, but if we talk they do not even listen. Even in politics, youth demands are not listened to. Youths are only there to clap."

Dang



Political tension, conflict and/or violence

Key informants were divided over whether there had been an increase or decrease in political discussions and debates in the district. While some said there had been an increase in political activities due to the upcoming CA elections, others believed they had remained unchanged. However, most key informants asserted that political clashes and tensions in the district had decreased in the last six months. As illustrated by one key informant, the reason behind the decreased tensions between the political forces was linked to the activities of their youth wings. "Youth wings in this district are unlike other districts where there is YCL and Youth Force and they have enmity and clash. All these youth wings do is talk about their parties and nothing else." Unlike in the RCA, where respondents feared that the upcoming elections would bring increased violence, this time fear was markedly reduced. Although the CPN-M's anti-election position and its possible impact on the elections was mentioned, the level of concern over insecurity has waned.

Identity-based tensions, conflicts and/or violence

Identity-related tensions were not reported in Dang. Most key informants actually believed that the relationship between identity groups has improved or remained unchanged. People of various identities reportedly have a harmonious relationship. Although there is a significant presence of Tharus in the district, the demand for a Tharuhat federal unit has not affected ethnic harmony in the district compared to other far-western districts.

Crime and armed group-based tensions, conflicts and/or violence

Over the last six-month period, criminal activities in Dang district have reportedly increased. Most respondents believed that criminal activities have surged due to an increased number of robberies, burglaries and rape cases. The easy availability of Ncell SIM cards in the market was cited by one informant as a factor behind the rise of crime in the district. Cases of drug trafficking from across the border were also reported and attributed to lax vigilance on the part of law enforcement authorities. According to one key informant, criminals can be divided into three categories: young, unemployed and impoverished. A respondent from the Nepal Police stated that criminals tend to commit crime in Dang and then flee to other districts to hide. Some reportedly even flee to Kathmandu, which makes it difficult for the district police to track them. Tulsipur area in Dang was cited by many informants as a key area of criminal activity.

Other security issues, including sexual and gender-based violence

Women were described as vulnerable by a number of informants. They are insecure travelling after dark and fear being sexually assaulted and robbed. They are also most likely to be victims of domestic violence. According to informants the number of rape cases is on the rise, which increases women's sense of insecurity. It was unclear whether actual cases of domestic violence and rape have risen, whether people are now more educated and sensitised about these issues and more actively reporting cases, or whether the perception of an increase was due to widespread media coverage of the issues.

Other security concerns such as suicide rates, traffic accidents and unemployment were reported by respondents. Police records indicate that there are 15-16 cases of suicide every month. Suicide victims reportedly fall into two age categories: 18 to 22-year-olds and middle-aged people in their 50s and 60s. The police could not ascertain the motives behind these suicides but youth suicides are assumed to be related to unsuccessful love affairs. The number of traffic accidents was also reported as a matter of serious concern.

Unemployment is rife across the district according to informants. This was perceived as the main factor behind the drive to migrate to other countries or resort to crime.

Resource-based tensions, conflicts and/or violence

Other than minor disputes over sand, stones and land, major tension, clashes or conflicts over resources were not reported in the district. As a result of internal migration, however, the strain on public services is increasing. The demand for water, electricity and telephone lines has increased, but the supply remains limited. As a result, this has bred a certain level of resentment.

When questioned about the increasing number of cement factories in the district, key informants believed that it would inevitably lead to tensions in the future. According to key informants the people of Dang will eventually be compelled to go and shut the cement factories due to the environmental pollution. Similar sentiments were expressed during the RCA about the potential of the cement factories to cause a rise in tensions.

The role of youth in tensions, conflicts and/or violence

Youth in Dang also suffer from a lack of employment. They often seek to travel out of the country in the absence of gainful employment opportunities. According to a key informant, youth can be divided into two categories: those in the first group are affiliated to political parties, and those in the second, while not affiliated to any political party, still have inclinations towards one party or another. Those who are affiliated to a party are used by political forces in both positive and negative ways. They are mobilized for protests and enforce *bandahs* when required. At the same time, however, they are also mobilized for social activities. A few respondents perceived that educated youth without employment are more vulnerable because they have qualifications, but no opportunity to utilize them. The lack of gainful opportunities was perceived as driving frustration, criminal activity and drug abuse.

One informant reported that the government enacted a youth policy in 2066 (2009/10) and that authorities followed this policy in planning for youth. However, this seemed to have little effect on youth in the district as there was no mention of any positive results from this policy.

Alongside more negative points, respondents mentioned that youth play an active role in the community by generating new ideas because they are more familiar with new technology.

3. Recommendations

The situation in the Sajhedari Bikaas target districts has not seen major changes in the last six months, therefore the recommendations outlined in the RCA remain relevant. Below are additional points to consider based on the most recent conflict assessment findings.⁵

Constructive engagement with youth, especially young men

Both youth and other respondents repeatedly said that young people, in particular young men, are used by political parties in order to advance their interests, often by intimidating people or even using force. This contributes not only to youth getting involved in violence and crime but also to an impression and attitude among young people that violence is an appropriate means to secure their interests. Youth are aware that they are being used, and are interested in engaging with social issues in a more constructive manner. This could provide an entry point for Pact to work with them towards a more positive role.

Mitigating identity-based tensions during post-election discussions on federalism

While identity-based tensions in most districts have not increased significantly, many respondents were concerned that once discussions and negotiations on identity-based federalism and its potential implications on people's lives increase, especially in the CA, tensions at the district and community level could potentially escalate. The Far West in particular could be a hotspot for tensions between Tharu and Pahadi or other non-Tharu communities. This is likely to have a number of implications for Pact:

- Should tensions escalate, the operational space for Pact and its partners to carry out activities will decline. A risk mitigation strategy should be in place for this case.
- Increasing tensions may have an impact on dynamics within the Pact team and its relations with IPs and local partners. Pact should observe the situation closely and think about internal/cross-organizational mitigation and team-building mechanisms.
- There should also be a clear understanding on how staff in the team can voice differing opinions on identity-based issues and tensions, including on identity-based federalism or identity-based discrimination, without hurting other

⁵ It is of course not implied that Pact might not already be aware of or working on some of these issues.

colleagues' feelings. Pact might want to discourage staff from voicing their personal views on identity issues publicly.

- When selecting local partner organizations, Pact should consider how these choices might be interpreted by different identity groups.
- When planning and implementing activities, Pact needs to consider how they will be perceived by different identity groups, and what implications they might have on local identity-based dynamics. For example, will people feel that one identity group has been preferred over another in selecting participants or project locations? How will certain activities or statements (for example by staff or Public Service Announcements) be interpreted?
- Pact and partners should explore whether they can bring people from different identity groups together to engage constructively, bridge gaps and build trust through their activities. This applies not only to activities specifically targeted at mitigating tensions, but also to other activities that could be used as tools to promote social harmony.

In addition to tensions related to debates about federalism, there are a number of other potential conflicts that Pact may want to pay close attention to:

- Tensions between identity groups are less significant in target districts in the Mid-West, but there is prejudice against some groups, particularly the Madhesi and Muslim communities. Low-level tensions between different religious groups were also highlighted. Pact might want to consider activities or other means to reduce those resentments and prevent them from building up, including by engaging with youth from different identity groups.
- While many respondents felt that caste-based discrimination, especially the practice of untouchability, is less common than before, especially in urban areas, the many examples cited demonstrate that this practice continues. They include cases in which local government stakeholders or institutions were perceived as not treating people from all caste groups equally. Pact may want to explore opportunities to target caste discrimination, possibly in cooperation with local government stakeholders or institutions to ensure that there is a strong buy-in from their side and to strengthen their accountability. This could include building or strengthening the knowledge and capacity of local government stakeholders and institutions on non-discriminatory approaches. In following such an approach, the need for sensitivity in order to avoid being seen as excluding other (non-Dalit) castes should also be taken into account, as recommended in the RCA.

Empowering women without putting them at risk

As in the RCA, SGBV and domestic violence, mainly targeting women, came out as one of

the main security challenges across all districts. Saferworld would therefore like to reiterate the recommendation that Pact should focus specifically on addressing conflict and security issues related to women and girls, either by directly engaging with women and girls, or by strengthening gender-sensitive approaches by institutions or other actors engaging with conflict and security issues. Based on the most recent findings there are a couple of additional points that Pact could consider:

- Requests for more tangible support for women and girls suffering from violence have been repeated. Examples include strengthening existing safe houses for female victims of violence, and possibly establishing additional ones. Respondents mentioned that these houses can only provide shelter for some weeks, and that after that women have few opportunities to support themselves. It was suggested that women in safe houses could be provided with skills training and other support that would allow them to escape violence, especially domestic violence. Coordination with governmental and civil society stakeholders currently engaging with these issues is important.
- Single women were highlighted as a particularly vulnerable group that requires more support and protection. The number of single women is likely to increase in the future as more women leave abusive relationships, so more efforts may be needed to address the challenges they face.
- Respondents mentioned that women sometimes face repercussions from their families and communities when returning from training or workshops organized by (I)NGOs, such as being accused of promiscuous behavior. This needs to be taken into consideration when organizing events. Ways to reduce resentment (for example, by providing gender-sensitive travel and accommodation arrangements) should be explored.

Engaging with vulnerable groups

- Individuals infected with HIV were mentioned in a number of KIIs and GDs as suffering from social prejudice. A stigma is attached to the infection and they are susceptible to abuse and violence. This is another issue that could be addressed by the Sajhedari Bikaas project.
- While LGBTI respondents indicated that they are now treated with more respect than before, including by local authorities, they still face discrimination and prejudice. When addressing gender discrimination, challenges faced by this group should also be taken into consideration.
- The increase in the number of suicides is a matter of concern. No studies or investigations are under way to explore the reasons behind the surge but this negative trend is gaining momentum in society and could be a topic for further exploration.

Engaging with local and district-level government stakeholders

- As mentioned above, youth, especially young men, are often seen as potential troublemakers. At the same time, local and district-level authorities appear willing to reach out to youth and engage with them in a more constructive way, while youth would like to be taken more seriously and to be involved in decision-making. Bringing together youth and local or district-level government stakeholders, including the police, might be an opportunity to build trust and understanding of each other's concerns and interests.
- Women are at particular risk of becoming victims of insecurity, and while civil society organizations and government institutions such as the Nepal Police Women and Children Service Centers are increasing services for women facing violence, resources and capacity are still limited. Pact may want to strengthen them through capacity building, awareness-raising and advocacy activities, as well as through hardware support as far as this is possible.

There is a need for greater awareness on the part of the public about the government services that are available and how they can access them. A clear understanding of services and procedures is crucial in order to improve service provision and increase the accountability of service providers. Pact could therefore consider documenting what services are available, from whom, and how they can be accessed in a simple format that is easy to understand (for example step by step and with visual aids that can be understood by people with limited literacy skills). Ideally this would be developed together with local authorities, taking into consideration and building upon existing work. This might be complemented by awareness-raising for staff in local government offices to ensure that they treat all people equally and provide services to them regardless of identity, financial status or personal relationships to government officials.

Annex 1: Methodology

The methodology for this conflict assessment was built upon proven methodologies and tools used previously for conflict assessments in Nepal, including the Rapid Conflict Assessment (RCA) carried out in the framework of the Sajhedari Bikaas project, and other contexts, and tailored to the specific requirements of this research. In particular, this means that the research followed up trends identified in the RCA.

In order to collect the required data a number of research methodologies were utilized:

Phase 1 – **Desk Research** – to inform and complement the assessment Saferworld reviewed other sources of information, particularly those that track incidences of tensions, conflicts or insecurity.

Phase 2 – **Participatory Consultations and Research** – was the key phase in terms of data collection and therefore entailed more complex data collection techniques. This phase was rooted in a Participatory Rural Appraisal (PRA) approach utilizing tools crucial to ensure that the research was as participatory as possible given the various social and cultural factors that can be an obstacle to this. This phase mainly took place at the headquarters level in the six districts, where the research team collected most of the data informing the research; this was complemented by interviews at the regional level (that is, in the Mid-West and Far West development regions). As much as possible Saferworld sought to get VDC/MC-specific information as well. The principal research methods used in this phase emphasized the gathering of perspectives from key stakeholders and informants who have a good understanding of the conflict at the national and district level, including in the specific VDCs, and the linkages between them; as well as community perspectives, including those of specific sub-groups who are either marginalized or specifically relevant in the conflict and security context. A strong focus was put on getting the views of youth. Participatory Research Techniques (PRTs) were applied, which included the following:

Key informant interviews (KIIs) at the regional and district level – a total of 60 KIIs were conducted at the regional and district level with the following aims:

- to get a comprehensive picture of conflicts, tensions and insecurity at the district level, including the causes, actors and dynamics and how they are influenced by or impact on developments at the regional or central level;
- to be better able to plan and conduct the research in a conflict-sensitive manner by being aware of existing sensitivities;
- to be better able to ensure Saferworld staff and researchers' safety and security during the research by being aware of potential sensitivities and risks;

- to ensure quality standards of the assessment.

Regional-level KIIs – two KIIs were conducted at the regional level in the Mid-West and Far West to get an overview of regional issues. The respondents interviewed had a strong understanding and expertise on the regions they are based in and included regional CSO coordinators and representatives from the Carter Centre’s regional offices.

District-level key informant interviews (KIIs) – are considered the core category of interviews to provide district specific information, qualitative data on perceptions on conflict, community safety and security issues. Moreover, they served to provide crucial information to determine structural and proximate causes of tensions, conflict, insecurity and violence, actors involved, and an initial assessment of ongoing initiatives and stakeholders working on those matters. KIIs allowed information to be elicited from target respondents who are strategically placed to speak on the relevant issues. The KIIs were designed to probe certain issues in detail that are of special interest to the purposes of this assessment (e.g. conflict/security trends, actors and responses, and individual and community priorities on conflict and insecurity). Semi-structured interview guideline questions were developed based on the questions designed for the RCA, and the questions were specifically tailored to suit specific interviews.

Approximately 8-10 KIIs were conducted in each of the six target districts. Interviewees were selected to represent a cross-section of administration, security and justice service providers, civil society and others well placed to comment on conflict and security dynamics, and the sample included target respondents who could provide a deeper understanding of views and priorities in terms of conflict, community safety, and security. To the extent possible, the respondent sample accommodated a balanced representation of men and women.

Group Discussions (GDs) with community representatives with a specific focus on the inclusion of youth took place in all the six target districts. GDs provided qualitative data on public perceptions of conflict, community safety and security issues, and sought to identify the security needs of different groups and priority areas of intervention that could guide the project implementation. They also endeavored to identify key reasons for conflict, tensions and insecurity, actors and trends, as well as geographic differences within the districts/regions. GD guideline questions were developed by Saferworld in consultation with Pact, building upon the questions used for the RCA to ensure consistency.

Two GDs were conducted in each of the six research locations. One was conducted with community members for which participants were selected to represent a cross section of Nepalese on the basis of both demographic statistics (e.g. caste, ethnicity, gender, age, socio-economic position, location) and occupation. The GD sample tried to include

participants from different VDCs/municipalities within the district to provide a deeper understanding of their views and perceptions. The second GD focused specifically on youth. The research sought to identify gender-specific perceptions and needs. The sample size of each GD was approximately 6-10 participants.

- **Regional-level KII** – Four KIIs were conducted in the regional headquarters of the Far West and Mid-West Nepal.

S. N	Key informant Interviews (KIIs) at the regional level	Quantity
1	Carter Centre regional offices	2
3	NGOs (regional offices/representatives)	2

- **District-level KIIs** – A total of 56 KIIs were conducted at the district level, including respondents from different categories.

S. N	Key informant interviews (KIIs) at the district level	Quantity
1	Local government official (such as CDO, LDO, Municipality or DDC Officer)	16
2	Security provider	5
3	Civil society/development practitioner	14
4	Legal expert, judiciary, community mediators (such as representatives from of Nepal Bar Association)	6
5	Journalist /media representative	8
6	Business community	4
7	Representative from education sector	3

- **Group discussions** – A total of 12 group discussions were carried out, two per district. In each district, one group discussion included male and female youth only, the other comprised community members in general (not age-specific) from both sexes.

S.N	Group discussions (GDs)	Quantity
1	Community members (men and women)	6
2	Youth (male and female)	6

3. Key principles

The conflict assessment was guided by key principles underlying Saferworld’s work.

Conflict and context sensitivity: Issues related to conflict and insecurity are highly sensitive, particularly in a post-conflict society where people are often polarized. Saferworld is committed to implementing the principles of conflict sensitivity in its own work, and to support other actors to operate in a way that is conflict-sensitive. Thus, Saferworld applied the principle of conflict sensitivity in the conflict assessment

throughout the methodology design, data collection, analysis and write-up. To do that, Saferworld was, for example, transparent about the purpose of the research; involved respondents and researchers in a way that did not put them at risk; selected and designed questions in a way that would not increase tensions, fuel stereotypes, etc.; and ensured confidentiality and anonymity of respondents at all times.

Inclusivity: Inclusivity is fundamental to Saferworld’s approach, and the views and perceptions of the most vulnerable groups in society (which often includes women, youth, elderly and minorities) are a key consideration for Saferworld. While there are limitations in terms of how many representatives from vulnerable and marginalized groups can be involved, Saferworld ensured a good understanding of the perceptions and specific concerns of those groups.

Gender and age-specific conflict and security concerns: Conflict and insecurity often affect men and women, as well as old and young differently, and any project that wants to be successful and effective will have to take this into consideration when designing responses. Thus, the research team talked to both male and female respondents from different age groups, and sought to get information on how conflict and insecurity affect different groups, and whether there are specific differences in how those groups perceive the current situation or potential future developments. However, the research team may not always have been able to get balanced involvement of male and female respondents, and may also have had to prioritize informants who were better informed about the relevant issues, even if fewer respondents from some groups were heard as a result.

Participatory methodology: The views and perceptions on conflict and security of community members and other key stakeholders are crucial to get a good understanding of the current situation, potential developments and opportunities for programming responses. To get this information, participatory tools have proven effective as they are suitable for obtaining rich qualitative data. Saferworld identified a limited number of tools that were applied and designed to provide good information on specific issues.

Annex 2: Guiding questions for Sajhedari Bikaas conflict assessment

Note for researchers:

Please inquire as to how each tension in the categories is going to affect the upcoming elections and vice versa.

For the first conflict assessment we will refer to changes in the last 6 months, for the following ones in the last 3 months.

We are particularly interested in the role youth plays in existing tensions/conflicts, both regarding positive and negative aspects. Please probe accordingly. Please also keep in mind that there are male and female youth, and their involvement might differ quite considerably.

To the extent possible, seek to get details about the situation in specific VDCs/MCs.

Political tensions/conflicts

1. What are the main political debates in your district? What do people get passionate/ heated about?
2. Who are the primary actors involved in such debates?
3. Why do you think these actors involved? What are their specific interests in those issues?
4. Has the nature of those political debates changed in the last 6 months? a) they have become much more heated; b) they have become a bit more heated; c) no change; d) they have become less heated; e) they have become much less heated; f) I don't know
5. Why do you think the debates have become more/ less heated?
6. Have any of those debates/differences in political opinion led to tensions or clashes? If yes, please elaborate [Probe: What are the tensions/clashes about? what was the nature of the clash/tensions? Why did it happen? Who was involved? When? Where?]
7. In the last six months how have these tensions/clashes changed? a) significantly increased b) increased c) remained unchanged d) reduced e) significantly reduced, f) I don't know
8. If the political debates lead to tensions, how, in your opinion, will this affect communities? [Probe: who will be affected, and how? Any specific locations?] How would you describe the perceptions people have towards political parties?

- a) very good; b) good; c) neither good nor bad; d) not good; e) very bad; f) don't know
9. How have perceptions of people towards political parties changed in the last 6/3 months? a) Improved a lot; b) improved a bit, c) remained the same d) worsened a bit; e) worsened a lot, e) I don't know
 10. Do political youth wings have any impact on issues in your community?
 11. If so, please describe the impact.
 12. In your opinion, how does the involvement of the youth wings affect the other non-aligned/affiliated youth in the district? [Probe – do they not get involved or remain apathetic? Are they swayed by the political youth wings or do they try to resist them and have differing opinions and stances?] How are other youth, who are not necessarily involved with other political parties, affected by these political debates or tensions (**IF** they exist) and how are they involved in such debates/tensions? How does it affect the other youth in the district?
 13. [IF respondents stated that tensions exist] How are these tensions addressed? [Probe: Who is involved? What are some of the positive or negative examples of peaceful resolution to political tensions?]

Identity-based tensions/conflicts

14. How would you describe relationships between different identity-based groups [caste groups, ethnic groups, religious groups, social classes] in your district?
15. In your opinions, how have relationships changed in the last 6 months? a) improved a lot; b) improved a bit, c) remained the same d) worsened a bit; e) worsened a lot, e) I don't know
16. When people in your community talk about their identity, which specific issues are most frequently discussed?
17. Who are the main actors involved in such debates?
18. Why do you think these actors are involved? What are their specific interests?
19. Has this led to tensions or clashes? If yes, please elaborate [Probe: What are the tensions/clashes about? Where? When? Who is involved?] [This question will be asked **IF** there are such tensions in the district] In the last six months how have these tensions changed? a) significantly increased b) increased c) remained unchanged d) reduced e) significantly reduced, f) I don't know
In your view, how have these tensions affected the communities and what could be the implications for the future?
20. What is or could be the role of youth in such debates and events (or upcoming events)?
21. How are the tensions addressed? [Probe: Who is involved? What are some of the positive or negative examples of peaceful resolution to identity-based tensions?]

22. In your opinion, are decision-making processes in your district/VDC inclusive? [Probe: are voices of youth, women, and members of marginalised communities including caste/ethnicity based groups, religions groups, among others, taken into consideration in such discussions/decisions.] If yes, could you elaborate how this is done? If not, what are the implications of not involving such members, does it create more tensions? Please elaborate.
23. Can you elaborate on existing local capacities for peace? [Probe: are there actors who are supporting peace? Who are they? How are they contributing?]

Crime and armed groups

24. According to your knowledge, what are the particular crimes/criminal activities that are taking place in this district? [Probe: organised crime, drugs trafficking, human trafficking, thefts, robbery, abduction, killing, tender process, white collar crime, etc.]
25. In your opinion, who are the actors involved in such activity? Who are perpetrators and how are victims in general [Note: no personal details, just ask about gender, age, ethnicity, religious background, political affiliation, etc. Probe – If one specific category of people comes up frequently then inquire why so; check specifically on the role of youth in crime]
26. Where do these crimes take place? Can you elaborate on the location? (Probe: please check if they have specific names of VDCs, ward no., etc.)
27. Are weapons being used? If yes, what kind? Is this new to this area? Please elaborate? [ask the respondent to provide examples and location] [NOTE: for researcher to see if there are stats related to this available at the district police office]
28. In your view, has the level of crime changed in your district in the last 6 months?
a) Significantly increased b) increased c) remained unchanged d) reduced e) significantly reduced, f) I don't know
29. If there is a change, why?
30. How has crime impacted the overall situation in the district?

Other security-related tensions/conflicts

31. In your view, what are the main security concerns for women?
32. What are the main security concerns for men?
33. What are the main security concerns for youth?
34. In your opinion, is sexual and gender based violence a problem in this district? If yes, please elaborate [Probe: what is happening? When? Where? Who is involved (as victims and perpetrators, but without asking for specific names)? Are any specific groups (gender, caste, ethnicity, religion, social groups) more affected

- than others?) [Note: since people often perceive that SGBV = VAW, ask whether there is also SGBV not targeting women in the district if this has not come up in the response]
35. Has there been any change in the number of SGBV cases in the last 6 months? a) a high increase; b) a small increase; c) no change; d) a small decrease; e) a big decrease; f) I don't know [Note: this question is esp. for security and justice providers or others who might have that specific knowledge]
 36. As far as you know, what is the scale of SGBV reporting in the district? [Note: this question is esp. for security and justice providers or others who might have that specific knowledge]
 37. What is your perception about the rule of law in this district?
 38. What is the state's response to crime and insecurity? What has been the result – has it been successful in your opinion?
 39. How would you assess the response of security providers in the last six months? And why?
 40. Significantly improved b) improved c) remained unchanged d) deteriorated e) significantly deteriorated, f) I don't know
 41. Is there any community response mechanism to curb crime? If there are any, can you please elaborate? [Probe: are there any neighbourhood watch type mechanisms, increase in private security providers – who is initiating it, who is involved, how is it perceived?]
 42. In your view, who are people mainly going to in order to seek justice? What are some of the formal and informal justice mechanisms in the district?
 43. Are there any challenges in approaching formal justice mechanisms such as the courts and security providers? [Probe – what sort of barriers exist?]
 44. Are there any other outstanding security related issues that you want to mention?

Resource-based tensions/conflicts

45. Are there any resource related issues/tensions within the district?
46. If yes, what are the tensions about? [Note: it could for example be land, forest, river, sand, border issues, lack of employment. Also seek to identify any underlying structural causes that might fuel resource-based tensions]
47. Who are the main actors involved in this?
48. Where do these types of tensions occur mostly? Why? When?
49. How has the tensions changed over the last 6 months? a) Significantly increased b) increased c) remained unchanged d) reduced e) significantly reduced, f) I don't know
50. What is role of youth in such tensions?

51. Are there any border related tensions in the district? [Applicable for all districts except Surkhet]
52. How have these tensions been addressed and who was involved in addressing them?
53. What is unemployment situation in the district?
54. Who is mainly suffering from unemployment?
55. How are the unemployed coping with life? What sort of activities are they involved in?

Youth [Note: always check for male and female youth, and potential differences!]

56. What age group is normally considered as youth? [Note: the age bracket for youth can be quite big in Nepal (even above 45), so we need to be aware who respondents are talking about]
57. Are youth taking an active role in community life? Can you please provide positive and negative examples of youth engagement?
58. What are the youth most interested in in their free time?
59. In your opinion, who are at-risk youth in this district? What is putting them at risk? ['at-risk' refers to youth at risk of becoming actively involved in tensions, conflict, violence]
60. Who are the vulnerable groups within the youth category? ['vulnerable youth' refers to youth who are vulnerable to becoming victims of tensions, conflict, violence]
61. What risk are they posing to the society?
62. How does the community deal with difficult youth?
63. Do youth have problems that they might not be able to solve on their own; and what kind of support they would need?
64. What do youth think about their role and acceptance in society?
65. How do youth think about their own level of agency?
66. How do youth think about their relationships with VDC secretary; security providers; service providers; justice mechanisms?
67. How do the generational gaps between youth and other age groups manifest itself? What could be the reasons behind it?

Elections

68. Will you go to polling station to cast your vote - definitely will go, will assess the security situation and decide, definitely will not go, don't know.

69. Do you think the elections will be conducted in a peaceful manner? [The elections will be a) Peaceful, b) mostly peaceful c) Sporadic violence d) Very violent e) Don't know.]
70. [If respondent replies options b-d] Which group/groups do you think will be engaged in violence and why?
71. [Only ask if violence is mentioned in the previous responses]: What type or scale of violence do you foresee? Will weapons be used? Where will this violence occur the most?
72. In your opinion, if violence occurs, what will be its impact?
73. What preventive measures are needed to curb electoral violence?

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