

Preparation Material for Volunteers
Nepal in a Nutshell -

Nepal is a landlocked country in South-Asia. It covers an area of about 147,18km² and it measures about 800km east-west and about 240km as its widest point north-south. Nepal is enclosed by Tibet, China respectively, in the north and India in the south. It contains the second biggest range of altitude on the earth, starting with the Terai, less than 100m above sea level, and finishing at the top of Mount Everest, with 8850m above sea level. With this comes an enormous ecological diversity, where climatic, geographic and infrastructural conditions change in a mere range of 160km. With the Himalayan being a geologically young mountain range of about 45 billion years, Nepal is located in a seismic active zone. Consequences of this are that the Himalayans are less eroded than other mountain ranges, that the mountain building process continues until today, sending the mountains approximately 1cm higher every year, resulting in natural erosion, landslides, silt-laden rivers, rock faults and earthquakes. Several rivers, which all merge into the Ganges sooner or later, caused deep gorges in the landscape of Nepal. The Gali Kandhaki valley between the Annapurna and Dhaulagiri massifs is considered the world's deepest gorge, with a vertical gain of 7km spaced between 20km.

Nepal can be divided in several physiographic regions: plains in the south, four mountain ranges and the valleys lying between them. It is mostly split in three regions, the Terai, the Pahar or Midland and the Himal or High Mountains.

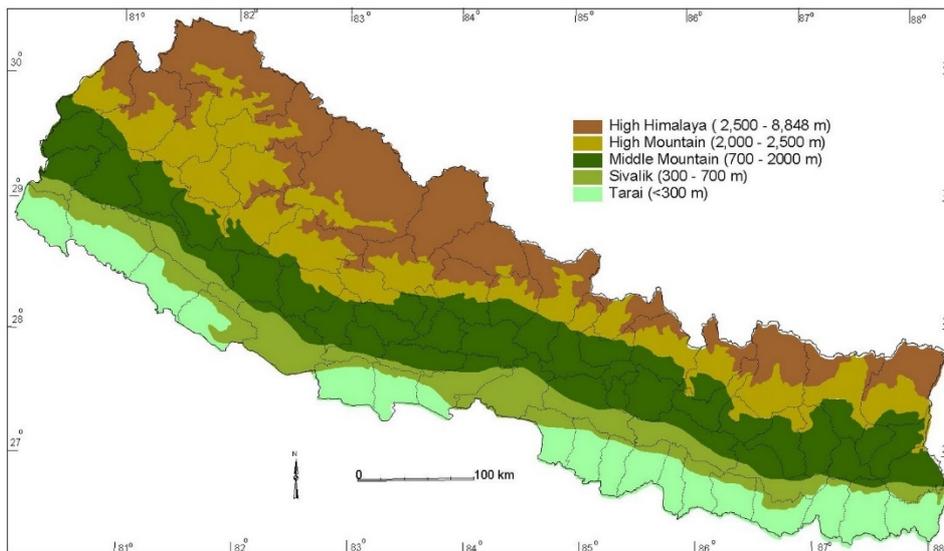


Figure 4.2. Physiographic regions of Nepal (Source: Topographic Survey Branch, Department of Survey, His Majesty's Government, Nepal, 1983)

Fig.1: This map shows the different regions with the height rising from south to north and west to east.

Terai

Terai is a low land region containing some hill ranges. The mountainous range of the Gagentic range expands about 40km into Nepal before the land raises up an average 900m to form the Chure Hills (Siwalik Hills). These run the length of the country and are one of the four mountain ranges in Nepal. The range separates the Terai from the Inner Terai or Dum. The Terai region covers 14% of Nepals land, but holds 47% of the population. Due to its less erodible soils, fertile lands, subtropical to tropical climate it is the agricultural most important region in Nepal. Almost all industrial settlements, apart from Kathmandu can be found in this area.

North of the Inner Terai extends the Mahabharat Range, the next range of foothills, also called the “Middle hills”. These vary between 1500m to 2700m in height and are characterised by water retentive soils that allow cultivation and extensive terracing.

Pahar/Midland

Between the Mahabharat Range and the Himalaya lies a broad, extensively cultivated belt called the midlands, or the Pahar zone. This contains the fertile regions of Kathmandu, Banepa and Pokhara. It covers 30% of the land, with 45% of the population. Here heights up to 3000m above the sea level can be reached. Microbiology, soil and geomorphology vary in the midlands on very small scales, whereby the conditions for settlement and agriculture change significantly from place to place. Nonetheless, it contains the historically core settlement of Nepal.

Himal/High mountains

The Himalaya or high mountain region contains 8 of the 10 highest peaks in the world. The Himalaya do not form an unbroken wall of peaks, but rather groups of massifs. Most of the population in this region settled in the valleys. Settlements can be found in the summer up to 5000m above sea level. On the south side of the mountains high precipitation leads to erosion of the soil and makes agriculture very difficult, whereas on the north side of the mountains almost no rain falls which makes farming almost impossible. Overall, there is food shortage in the high mountains and tourism is the main source of income. The Himalaya range is crossed by passes that have been used for centuries by Himalayan traders.

North of the Himalayan is a high desert region, the Trans-Himalaya, similar to the Tibetan plateau. This area incorporates the infertile valleys of Mustang, Manang and Dolpa as well as the Tibetan Marginals, the fourth range of mountains. The Trans-Himalayan region is a rainshadow region and therefore lacks significant rainfall.

Mount Everest’s “real” name is its Tibetan name *Chomolangma*, which translates as Goddess Mother of the Universe. The Nepali name is *Sagarmartha*, which is Sanskrit for “Brow of the Ocean”.

The Sanskrit word Himalaya means abode (alaya) of the snows (himal).

Mountains cover 64% of Nepal’s land mass.

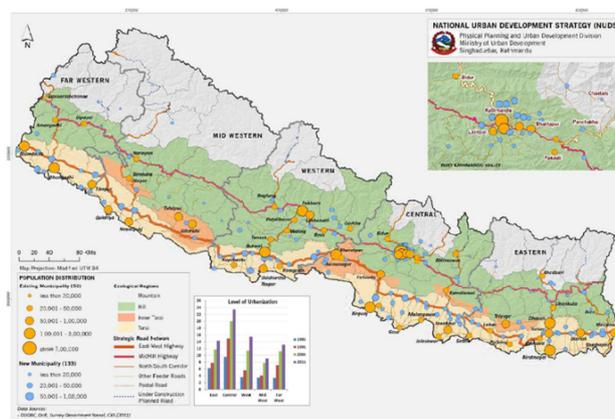


Fig.2: Here you can see the distribution of population as well as the different regions, Terai, Inner Terai, Midland and Himalaya.