



Small farmers in the hills of Nepal keep goats and sell them before important religious ceremonies every autumn.

Social inclusion as a precondition of development in Nepal

In Nepal, certain groups such as ethnic minorities or *dalits* face discrimination or exclusion. A local NGO has been organising communities into groups, purposefully mixing discriminated with non-discriminated people. Through training programmes and by encouraging discriminated people to take on higher positions, the organisation has allowed for many barriers to be broken down within the communities. This has created more opportunities for previously excluded people.

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Social inclusion has been a guiding principle for many non-governmental organisations in Nepal, long before it became a justified demand from many marginalised groups. The country was run for centuries by a few elites, who excluded large parts of the population on the basis of class, ethnicity, caste, religion, language, and gender. The system was replaced by a multi-party democracy in 1990. But political parties competed for power and did not fulfil people's needs and aspirations. The frustration led to an armed conflict, which, over a period of ten years, cost more than 13 000 lives, caused the displacement of hundreds of thousands and brought great human and economic loss. New elections in 2008 helped to declare Nepal a republic.

In this context, SAHAS Nepal, a local NGO, has for the last decade been engaged in rural community development. It works in Okhaldhunga, a hilly district in the Eastern Region of Nepal. Only recently the district's headquarters became accessible by road, though most of its villages can only be reached by walking for many hours. In Okhaldhunga the majority of people depend on agriculture as their only means of income. Land distribution has always been a matter of great inequality: the rare fertile lands

in the valleys usually belong to high-caste Hindus, whereas the less fertile land (which is very difficult to cultivate) belongs to ethnic minorities and *dalits*. This is the reason why a majority of the population depend on daily labour to earn an income, either "on-farm" or "off-farm". Many people have to migrate seasonally to be able to make a living for themselves and their families.

The exclusion of ethnic minorities, *dalits* and women in general, applies to most areas of life in Nepal. For example, *dalit* women are not allowed to fetch water from public wells, as people fear they would pollute the water. Therefore they have to walk for hours every day to reach a well for them only. Girls and women in rural areas are still deprived of equal access to education. They have to work in the household from an early age, and after marriage they are expected to do the same in

Raising pigs enables a father to send his children to school

Dil Bahadur Rai is one of the beneficiaries of the small farmers support scheme. He has been an active member of his community group since 2005. At that time, he was a poor man, who could feed his family only by migrating to India seasonally. Back in his village, he was involved in various group-related development activities, although that meant less time available for earning money as a wage labourer. Because he was a hard working member of his group, he was selected as beneficiary of the small farmer support scheme. The scheme supports farmers by giving them animals to raise, in order to increase their income. Dil Bahadur received a local black pig from SAHAS Nepal. SAHAS taught him how to raise the animal, and provided support in building appropriate shelter for it.

So far, this pig has had three litters. Dil Bahadur raised them successfully. According to group's rule he gave one piglet as "gift" to a poor member. He sold the remaining piglets for between 600 Nepalese rupees and 1000 rupees each, which is more than a wage labourer earns in a month. His annual income increased to around 5000 rupees. With this money he sends his children to school, and is able to feed his family of seven without having to go to India anymore.

their husband's household. Consequently, many parents still consider it worthless to invest in their daughters' education. *Dalits* and ethnic minorities have lesser access to income sources, for example, *dalits* are not employed in the hospitality sector, because nobody would accept food from their hands. In contrast, political power (at all levels) is almost exclusively distributed among Hindu men, as are the fields of public administration, education, and private enterprise.

Breaking down the barriers

SAHAS' mission is to empower these excluded communities by enabling their access to knowledge, skills and resources. The entry-point into development activities is the social mobilisation of target groups.

Social mobilisation in this sense has two dimensions. The first dimension is organising the communities into groups. In Nepal there is a saying: "We are born alone, we die alone, and in life we have to fight alone." Communities sometimes have to be convinced that forming a group is much more effective for social change than struggling alone. Indeed, people sometimes join groups only when they see other groups' successes. The second dimension of social mobilisation is to weaken the existing exclusive social structure in order to include everybody in decision making. Group members are poor *dalits*, poor people from different ethnic groups, as well as poor people from so-called high castes. Only a few groups exist that are for *dalits* only. Experience has proved that in mixed groups people learn from each other. For example, often *dalits* hesitate to take over positions like chairperson or treasurer of a group. Due to life-long discrimination, they feel themselves incapable of filling such a position. In such a case, SAHAS may suggest to fill the position of the chairperson with a person from a more educated background, but fill the position of the vice-chairperson with a *dalit*. The mutual benefit of working together like this is supervised closely.

Group members receive capacity building in the areas of leadership development, organisational development and group management. They learn that they have to call for meetings regularly in order to keep their groups functioning. They learn how to analyse and prioritise their communities' problems and how to create strategic action plans to solve them. Interestingly, the focus on groups' own action plans contributes to social inclusion, too: as soon as a problem which concerns everybody is identified (like insufficient irrigation systems, or child malnutrition), the whole group joins in to address it, regardless of caste or ethnic group. As soon as a group runs smoothly, it gets self-responsibility. Thus group members get first-hand experience in what it means to be responsible for their own development process.

Non-formal education classes contribute greatly to the process of empowerment. SAHAS conducts classes for children who dropped out of school, and for adults. Group members learn reading and writing, and their awareness is raised about issues like gender equality, social inclusion and human rights. Moreover, group members take part in skill trainings like kitchen gardening, goat and pig rearing, the construction of improved smokeless stoves and nutritional issues, among others. The groups select the neediest among their members to be the beneficiaries of any external help. A small farmer support scheme and a porters' support scheme, among others, have been started up. Both serve as examples of best practice regarding social inclusion.

Being inclusive as an organisation

Following an inclusive approach in programmes and projects is only credible if the organisation is internally inclusive, too. Consequently, SAHAS Nepal's members belong to different

From wage labourer to entrepreneur

Until recently porters had to carry goods to Okhaldhunga on their backs. Most of the porters are *dalits* or belong to ethnic groups. Other community members regard their work as that of mules, and do not pay them any respect. After a road was constructed to southern Nepal, trucks began to transport goods to Okhaldhunga Bazaar – and the porters' families faced a severe crisis.

Sujana Rai is one of the women who earned her family's living by carrying goods. She is a member of the 'porters group'. The group received an initiating fund of 5000 rupees and started a saving and credit scheme among group members to match this fund. Group members could apply for a loan from the generated fund. Several of them used the money to buy local products, which they started to sell from place to place and from market to market.

For Sujana and the others it makes a great difference to carry their own goods instead of being contracted. Her self-confidence has increased. She invested the earned money into her own shop. "My village is remote and we do not have many shops. That is why I thought it would be a good opportunity to open one. All village people come to my shop. It runs well and I was able to pay back the loan of 5000 rupees to the group already!" she tells us proudly. Usually men are sceptical about their wives being entrepreneurs. Not so Sujana's husband. Perceiving the difference his wife's earnings made to family life, he started supporting her by carrying goods from far away places to be sold in her shop. Locals of all castes treat Sujana with respect now – and that is even more important for her than the fact that she earns enough to make a living.

ethnic groups, come from different regions (from the Far Western Region to the Eastern Region, urban and remote areas) and belong to different castes. SAHAS works with local staff at the field level. Whenever possible, people from ethnic minorities or *dalit* are selected to work within their village communities and in cooperation with Village Development Committees (VDCs). This in itself causes confrontations from time to time. The owner of one of SAHAS' local offices refused to give the rooms for rent if a *dalit* staff would work in them. Unable to reject a proper income from renting out the rooms, he finally agreed, nonetheless disapproving of the presence of the staff member. In the course of time, he became impressed by the impacts of SAHAS' work made in his community. Today the man joins in activities and takes food in the same room as SAHAS' staff. Says Nirmala, a SAHAS' staff member: "Earlier I would not have dared to facilitate development projects in my community, not even to speak to other people in public. And nobody would have listened to me, either, because I am *dalit*. Being a staff member of SAHAS has boosted my self-esteem, and it changed people's attitude towards me. They now respect me and listen to what I have to tell them."

Stories of small successes like this show that social inclusion can happen. At the local level, it needs awareness-raising activities to open up people's minds about the dignity of every human being. It also needs some external support to enable the poor and socially excluded people to participate in development processes.

National stakeholders are already very much aware and listen to the issues being raised by women, ethnic groups, and *dalits*. Let's hope that this time the participation of all excluded groups in the process of building a "new Nepal" will lead to a national success story, too.

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