

UNVs bring volunteer spirit into communities in Nepal

by Chris Whitehouse

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Kathmandu, Nepal: Planning to restore some old buildings in a village near the capital city? Thinking of constructing fruit and vegetable markets in the lowlands? How about bringing small community-owned, water-powered electricity plants to remote mountain villages?

In all cases, it is vital for sustainability that the communities are fully involved. Despite the diversity of projects in which UN Volunteers are working in Nepal, the experiences of UNVs in 'bringing development projects to the people' are very similar. Talking with the illiterate farmer as easily as with the high-level government official and working free from political or other biases, UN Volunteers have proved their value in helping communities help themselves.

Stimulating communities' interest

Nepal, a young democracy bordering India to the south and China to the north, is a popular tourist destination for the people's rich cultural heritage, for its national parks and the world's highest mountain, Everest. "The remote mountain villages, often three or more days' walk from the nearest road or airstrip, score very poorly in development indicators," says Hemanta Kharel, Member Secretary of the government's "Remote Area Development Committee" (RADC). He explains: "Life expectancy is of 36 years in Mugu District, for example, and literacy rates in Rasuwa are only 15 per cent. UNV training in Nepal For women, the statistics are even more worrying, with literacy rates for women as low as three per cent in three of our remote districts. "RADC seeks to enhance community involvement and ownership in its local-level microhydro and solar system electrification schemes.

It is supported by the 'Community Mobilization and Support Programme for Remote Mountain Villages' project, that is funded through grants from the Japanese Trust Fund. Up in the mountains, the project employs a team of one international and six national UN Volunteers. "Our electrification schemes offer huge potential to improve the standards of living in remote areas, and the involvement of our UNVs in this project has greatly enhanced the communities' interest and participation in our work," says the RADC Member Secretary.

A succession of visits by a NUNV enables the community to learn more about microhydro operating system, to form a democratic 'Users Committee' (UC), draw up an agreed constitution and have the UC registered as an NGO. It helps furthermore agree the appointment of operator(s) and manager, decide a tariff system to ensure that running, maintenance and repair costs are covered and finally explore potentials for Income Generating Activities.

Through central-level and site-level training programmes, the UC members develop skills in account keeping, record keeping and NGO leadership and management. Once registered as NGOs, the UCs may choose to develop links with other larger NGOs, perhaps launching small savings and credit programmes in their communities, or arranging literacy programmes. In just two years, nearly 40 villages in 21 districts of Nepal have received support from the project.



Educating and raising awareness

The project is initiating change -- but it is clear that this change may need to be gradual. National UN Volunteer Lal Bahadur Waiba explains: "In many of these remote areas, tradition does not encourage women to take leading roles, to be decision-makers. Yet it is the women who can be most affected by the arrival of a microhydro. One might say that we should enforce a rule that all UCs should include a minimum female representation, but to be honest I don't think this is the best way.

The women will feel very uncomfortable. Due to their traditional upbringing, the women may be uneducated and illiterate; on top of this, they will have their heavy workload and responsibilities as wives and mothers, and so cannot easily spare the time. Even their own mothers would criticize them if they were to start ignoring their household duties and attending these new meetings. So we go slowly, gradually nudging, until one by one a few women can be encouraged to join in. It has to be a gradual process of education and awareness raising."

National UN Volunteer Bharat Prasad Khanal says: "The more mature UCs can become very enthusiastic. In Mugu, one UC has stimulated the formation of a number of Savings and Credit Groups; in another, the UC has succeeded in accessing outside support for goat-raising, chicken-farming, sanitation and literacy programmes." Bharat remembers the smile on the face of UC Chairman Gopal Bahadur Bhum as he confessed, "So, this is development! Before, we felt that development was the responsibility of government; but now we see that development is our duty."

Recognizing the value of community participation

The hard work of NUNV Social Mobilizers is rewarded by the job-satisfaction it can provide, as illustrated by national UN Volunteer Dhruba Nath Adhikari's account of his recent trip to Tipling microhydro site, in Dhading District. "The community there are so enthusiastic. The chairman and other friends from Tipling rushed to Kathmandu to collect the electric grinder (being supplied by RADC as an end-use income generation activity); I

accompanied them back to Tipling, and installation of the grinder should be finished in a few weeks. And there's now a women's group there, started through the inspiration of two women members of the Microhydro UC three months ago. The Village Development Council (VDC) has offered them a room, they are in the process of registering as an NGO, and are soon to hold a mass meeting in the village to recruit more members.

While I was there, they asked me to help arrange a three-day training for them, bringing two facilitators from district level. In all, 22 participants, including all the women's group members, as well as some members from the UC and the VDC. It cost the project very little (a few items of stationery), but they are now so much more motivated and confident. You know, things are really moving ... they are not just getting electricity, but much more besides!" The staff at RADC, both centrally and at district level, has acquired a far greater appreciation of the value of full community participation in their microhydro programme.

Mobilization of communities is one important aspect of the NUNVs' work, yet the behind-the-scenes bridge-building is of equal, if not of greater importance. In the microhydro field, this entails bringing together the various groups within a community, as well as the village-, district- and national-level government structures, and also non-governmental bodies at each level. The interests of the various stakeholders may sometimes be shared, and the NUNV acts as a matchmaker. Sometimes, there will be conflicts of interest, and the NUNV plays a marriage-counsellor role. The same is true for the other projects, in which UN Volunteers play a similarly crucial role.

Involving all concerned in the community

The 'Small Marketing Infrastructure Project' has been supporting the farming communities in the lower hills and the lowland 'Terai' of Nepal, nearer to India. A team of four NUNV extension workers has been working with the local farmers, retailers and wholesalers to improve production, transportation, presentation and processing of the fruit and vegetables, and to facilitate the organization of 'Market Management Committees'.

NUNV Lalan Singh started working at the grassroots level, as a national UNV field worker. The UN Volunteer, who was given the responsibility of overseeing the work of three NUNV colleagues who later joined the team, explains: "The farmers didn't seem to know really what the wholesalers want. For example, they would cut all the leaves from a cauliflower to reveal the head, and then cover each head with newspaper to protect the cauliflower from drying out! It emerged that this was a complete waste of time. The wholesalers actually preferred to get the cauliflowers with their leaves on! So, you can see... the information system was lacking.

Then there are the farmers who would bring their tomatoes piled high in their bamboo baskets, with those at the bottom getting squashed and bruised. We found that if ox carts used a few planks of wood, you could put layers of containers one above the other, and the bruising problem was solved."

"Getting the right people together to form market management committees, and enabling them to work effectively and efficiently has been another challenge," continues Lalan. To what extent would the Village Development Council (VDC) be willing for a group of traders and farmers to manage their own market? What

would the district level representatives of the Ministry of Agriculture, and other related bodies, think? How can their support be encouraged, yet have authority for the markets remaining completely with the management committee?

A reminder of the need for a strong community-based approach, yet with positive and clear roles for related government structures, can be found in many places. Across the country, a dozen markets had been built some years ago, in an earlier programme, but without sufficient consent and involvement of all concerned. Only three are now in use. The markets built through this project are now functioning and operating well -- and no small credit for this should be given to those UN Volunteers who worked so hard to get full community and stakeholder cooperation from market-design stage, to construction, to handover, and even beyond.

Working on a voluntary basis Although not labelled a 'social mobilizer', NUNV Cultural Heritage Specialist, Smita Shrestha finds herself spending a lot of time working with the people in a project jointly implemented by UNV and UNESCO.

Listed as a potential 'World Heritage Site', the 13th century Newari village of Khokana is famous both for its architecture and its mustard-seed oil. With modest financial assistance from UNESCO, the people of Khokana have brought about great change: two ancient and non-functioning mustard-oil mills are renovated and operational, two 'patis' (traditional meeting places) and a temple are restored (using traditional materials and tiling). The oldest pond in the village, the focus for an important annual religious festival, was cleaned of rubbish, which in places was up to two metres deep. As Smita explains, "the budget from UNESCO was very tight -- although it was actually more than the community members had originally requested! What was so satisfying was the way that the community got so involved in the work. The oil mills are owned by cooperatives, and so all the members agreed to put in their labour and find skilled people to carry out the renovation work.

The temple and patis are run by 'guthis' (groups of people who for many generations have been responsible for their upkeep). They were more than willing to put in their time to find the necessary old tiles, bricks and timbers, as well as to work on the restoration work itself. And best of all, it was the people of Khokana themselves who produced the project report, firstly in Nepali, and then found friends who translated it into English. And my role? I visited quite often to encourage, to congratulate, and occasionally to advise, and to remind doubting community members that this was really their project! That's why, during the farming season or during festivals, everything stopped, and that itself was a positive sign. They were working on a voluntary basis, and according to their own time constraints. In fact, one of the mills was finished well before the deadline they'd set themselves."

The physical restoration work may be completed, but this partnership of the people of Khokana with the UN Volunteers will continue. The people plan to enhance tourism-based income in the village, and to improve marketing of the very popular mustard oil produced here. Smita looks forward to working more with the people of Khokana.