

A Travel Report Nepal February – March 2012

by Stefanie Christmann

Stefanie Christmann, chairwoman of Esel Initiative, spent several weeks in Nepal to assess the project in Langtang. In order to help reduce the climate effects of her flight, a donation was made to www.atmosfair.de. All travel expenses were paid privately by Stefanie.

Unfortunately, there are many single mothers like **Passang D.** in Langtang: The 32-year-old widow owes 600.000 Rupia (100 Rupia/1 €) in medical fees for the treatment of her late husband. To pay for his funeral, she had to sell her small piece of land. After the funeral she had to move out of her in-law's house as the son next in line will now be the heir. At the moment, Passang is living with her four children (aged 10 years to seven months, the three older boys go to school) with her parents in a small room, where a few wooden planks cover the bare earth in front of the fire place. She knows that after her parent's death, she will be homeless once again. It has become harder to feed her children since she had to sell her land. She is struggling to make ends meet by brewing raksi. "Without my parents help, I could not feed my children. As soon as the baby is a bit older, I must find work as a day labourer again." She has now received a local cow with a calf and her cow is pregnant again. "The milk is for my children. I can now use the dung to help my parents grow potatoes for us." While some widows are able to stay in their husband's house, their living conditions are still harsh, with burdening debts from funeral expenses and many children to feed and clothe.

Building a house is very expensive in Langtang since wood must be brought in from afar. Langtang is a national park (mainly for the protection of the red panda). For the locals this means that tree felling and hunting are forbidden. Monkeys and boars also benefit from the protection of the red panda and the snow leopard. During the day, monkeys steal the harvest and at night, boars ravage the fields. Despite these difficulties, 39-year-old **Karmu G.** (mother of one daughter in second year) has managed to build a house during the eight months since she received her cow. Karmu was deserted by her husband and moved back to her parents. After she received the cow she borrowed money and used the walls of two houses to build her own small 2.5m x 2.5m house where she has started large-scale raksi production and an off-license. She has also leased a field as she now has dung. **Mlang D.**, a mother of four children aged five to 12 years, had to move back to her parents to survive after her husband's death. Once she received her cow, she and her children were able to move back into the empty house of her husband.

In the spring of 2011, Sahayog allocated two naks, 44 cows and 44 water buffalo in Langtang. The villages are very small (mostly just five to seven houses) and lie scattered across steep mountains. In Chilime, even the main village consists of only seven houses. The Sahayog helpers had to invest a considerable amount of time, but the rewards have been well worth it. In Langtang, there are many Tamang, a people with a unique cultural tradition. For example, they still wear hand-woven clothing made from goat wool. The goats and herders live on mountain pastures. A local organisation arranges placement of most of the infants of young single women to orphanages in Kathmandu. In contrast to other project regions, mainly widowed mothers and deserted wives with four or more children have

received animals in Langtang. Several of their husbands died from illness (mostly tumours) or fell to their death while working on the steep slopes; others were killed by the Maoists and many men left their wives with four or five children to marry a young girl elsewhere. The women told us that, fortunately, trafficking of women has slowed down in this region since even the younger women are no longer that gullible to fall for empty promises.

In the region below an altitude of approx. 2200 m, there are two harvests per year (beans, peas, barley, potatoes, chickpeas, corn, millet, also lentils in the lower regions). Thus, the mothers in the cow and water buffalo region are able to work for more than six months every year as day labourers. Since pay for one day working in the field in Langtang is only 50–100 Rupia, the women must accept whatever work they can get, regardless of how hard it may be. Petite 35-year-old widow **Vishnu K.** (four children under the age of 12), is slaving away for 300 Rupia (without food) on building sites. Vishnu received a water buffalo with a male calf which she intends to sell in two years for 20 000 Rupia. At the moment she gets 600 Rupia for one litre of ghee. She uses the dung on her own field. Single mothers also work as Sherpas. The 36-year-old widow **Yokki T.** (four daughters aged between 13 and four years) is one of them. Carrying a load of 30 kg for 2.5 hours uphill will earn her 200 Rupia. The 38-year-old widow **Yomend T.** (two children under the age of five) carries loads of 40 kg for trekking operators, several times a year for weeks on end, earning 200-250 Rupia per day (net). Since the Chinese are planning to build a road from the border to Kathmandu, these jobs are already getting sparse. We suspect that in a few years time, many men will have left the region due to lack of work. Therefore, in four to five years from now, we will return to Langtang to allocate more animals.

Some of the women have developed very clever business ideas, like 54-year-old **Diki S.**, who is not married and looks after the seven year old son of her late brother. The boy's mother also died very young. Diki brews raksi (25 Rupia per bottle). With her earnings she travels across the Tibetan border and buys biscuits and sweets wholesale, which she then sells in small portions in front of the school to the children of wealthier farmers. Diki has received a cow which is on a mountain pasture with other animals. Although she could sell her butter for 900 Rupia per kg across the Tibetan border, she feeds it to the child: "My butter is healthier than anything else. Since I got the cow, I no longer buy Chinese butter." The 43-year-old widow **Lakpa K.** (five children aged between 13 and two years, four attending school) has various sources of income: she weaves aprons for sale (approx. 6000 Rupia per annum), she brews and sells raksi, and she has four chickens and sells eggs. Her harvest has increased considerably since she can use the dung from her two female calves and her cow. She wants to keep all animals and sell butter in future. Before she received the cow, Lakpa cultivated without dung, accepting that her harvest would be small. All of the women, especially those in the region with cows, are very happy that they now have dung. Many had been forced to borrow dung and repay with an agreed share of the harvest. On leased land (50% of the harvest goes to the owner) this meant that there was very little left for a single mother. In the past, many mothers used to hire the cows of wealthier farmers for dung. During the months when fodder was scarce, they had to feed the animals and could keep the dung. But not all mothers were able to find cows for hire in the villages. **Nursi T.**, a 49-year-old widow lives in Gatlang and had to hire a cow in Gre, a day's walk (without cow) away. It was hard and risky to lead the cow across

the steep terrain back to Gatlang. Many mothers told us how difficult it is to find a cow for hire to get dung.

In Langtang, some women living at an altitude of 2000 m and higher, bring their cows uphill to a yak for mating. This costs them 1,000 Rupia (the bull is for free). The *direct* offspring, called dzos, are larger and stronger than cows and produce about three litres of very fatty milk (milk is priced according to fat content). A mature male animal can be sold for 25,000 Rupia or hired out for 500 Rupia/day for ploughing. Younger mothers often opt for dzos. However, since dzos offspring are not suitable for breeding, Sahayog asks the mothers to first produce at least one calf from a bull, which can then replace their cow later on.

Eleven women from Helambu-Langtang (10 of them with 10 years of schooling) have completed the midwifery training and I met seven **midwives** on my visit. Their commitment has been really exciting. Once a month they visit every village in their region to see whether there are any pregnant women. The time and effort these midwives put in on a voluntary basis is remarkable. They explain to the expecting mother what she must prepare for a safe and sterile delivery. They examine the mother and listen to the unborn child to check for any irregularities which may require a hospital referral. During pregnancy, the midwives also discuss ineffective or harmful traditional practices to ensure that no discord arises between the new mother and her mother-in-law, who in most cases will be present during delivery. For example, **traditionally**, the umbilical cord is cut after delivery of the afterbirth (with a non-sterile kitchen knife!), oil is dropped into the baby's eyes, mouth and ears, the delivery takes place close to an open fire, and the woman in labour is expected to eat a lot and remain lying down even during the bearing down period etc. In contrast, the birthing position with an upright back during bearing down as propagated by the midwives has been welcomed with great relief. The midwives also accumulate useful traditional knowledge and pass this on to the doctor via Sahayog. If, for example, the afterbirth fails to appear despite abdominal massage (curettage is not available, not even in the health centres), family members will go and search for a special toad found in streams, which will then be boiled and the stock given to the mother to drink. According to local experience, this results in prompt delivery of the afterbirth. Normally, one midwife looks after 6-7 and occasionally as many as 15 pregnant women simultaneously. Almost all of the midwives were involved in voluntary work before their training. Only 36-year-old **Nima T.**, mother of five, already worked as a lay midwife. However, her approach during labour has completely changed since she completed her training. She says she never used to visit the expecting mothers during pregnancy, whereas now she invests a lot of time caring for them. In the past, she would pay little attention to after-bleeding, but now she visits several times after the birth and in case of after-bleeding or high fever, will immediately bring the woman to hospital. The training at the hospital in Kathmandu has given the midwives a lot of respect and a good reputation in the villages. **Beda. K.**, for example, not only attends births in the villages, but is also called to the health centre if a woman arrives there for delivery.