

Travel report Nepal September – October 2013

by Stefanie Christmann

The chairwoman of Esel-Initiative, Stefanie Christmann, spent four weeks in Nepal to assess and broaden the project in Upper Mustang and northern Lower Mustang. To decrease the climate damaging effects of her flights, she made a contribution to www.atmosfair.de; she donated her travel expenses.

Once again, the visit was to Upper Mustang, where we had allocated the first animals in 2007, so that we could now begin to broaden the quality of the project. In order to monitor the entire project and to maintain its success, Sahayog Himalaya-Nepal (SHN) will not include any more regions in the allocation of animals. The aim is to create a source of income for the women; the income option shall enable them to improve their living conditions or to provide professional training for at least one child. Tsiring M.'s daughter, for example, is now in year 10 in school and wants to become a nurse. This is only possible in Pokhara or Kathmandu and the cost for her mother will be considerable. As Tsiring M.'s daughter will most likely look after her mother in old age, this would not only be a great developmental step for the daughter but also an opportunity for several villages in Upper Mustang to have a well trained nurse in the village throughout the year (the health posts are only open in summer).

By now, many women have four to five calves/cows and are self-sufficient in butter and oil (ghee) for the whole year and in grain for five to eight months. This is an enormous improvement. Some are able to harvest enough for an entire year, such as 33-year old single mother Tsiring D. from Dzong. She now has one cow and four calves of different ages. Her cow provides 3 l of milk every day; together this small herd produces plenty of dung for her fields. Her son is in 6th year in school. Tsiring also looks after her old mother. And yet, their housing conditions remain precarious. Many houses are built around a square inner court yard with a "balcony" running along the first floor facing the court yard. Like many other single mothers, Tsiring is living in the alcoves of this gallery, i.e. her tiny bedroom (with beds of clay covered with a thin carpet) is open to the courtyard. Her even smaller kitchen is below the stairs to the roof and is open to the elements.

It costs about 3,000 to 6,000 US\$ to build a small house which is sufficiently winter proof for Upper Mustang. Single mothers can only finance this if they a) speak Nepali, b) have enough self confidence, negotiating skills and education to work during the winter in the valley for traders in the village-to-village retail business (in Pokhara, Kathmandu) and c) have reliable relatives who can look after their children and cows during the winter. One of "our" mothers from Tsarang, Nima T., has now built a very beautiful house with three rooms in this way. However, most of the women are unable to read or write, many do not speak Nepali (there are 66 languages spoken in Nepal and most people living in the mountains did not attend school and only speak the local language). Only a few of the women have someone who will look after their children for several months. To build a house, they need a good source of income in or in the vicinity of their village.

In March 2013, the general meeting of Esel-Initiative decided in addition to finance in future the allocation of apple trees and small greenhouses. To qualify for this, the single mothers must have children who will be going to school for some years to come. While the widows usually own land, unmarried mothers do not. Based on our investigation locally, either parents, the oldest brother or an aunt are prepared to permanently transfer a 20 m²

field, witnessed and with a signed land transfer contract provided by Sahayog Himalaya-Nepal, to their daughter/sister/niece should she qualify for this assistance. Signature to this contract is a condition for the allocation. For the single mothers, this is a unique opportunity to secure their livelihood and that of their children substantially on a long-term basis, since in Upper Mustang, fruit and vegetable are scarce, expensive and in increasing demand due to the booming tourism, especially camping tourism in remote villages. The number of trekkers on the previously popular (and much cheaper) Jomsom-Beni trek has gone down since the road has been finalized and even buses use it. Instead, trekkers opt for the less accessible regions such as Upper Mustang and Manaslu and the campers want to purchase fruit and vegetables in the villages.

The design of the unheated greenhouses uses clay and stones for heat storage. The north facing side is built as a ridge-high wall of clay and stone, and along the ridge, there is a small strip of wood and clay to slow down the exhaust of the warm indoor air in the evening. The slanted side walls are also made of clay and stone, while the roof and the south facing side, all the way to the ridge, consist of plastic resting on a wooden or bamboo frame. The ground is dug out 50 cm deep since the deeper soil layers are warmer than the surface. Construction of such a greenhouse will take several weeks and during the construction period, we will pay the single mothers a builder's wage since they would otherwise have to live too long without additional income. The women will receive the first seeds and will be trained in the cultivation of seedlings and vegetables since they have no experience in growing tomatoes, cucumbers, courgettes, beans, cabbages, pumpkins etc. In Upper Mustang, these types of greenhouses can be used throughout the year with different crops in summer and winter. Some of the large guesthouses have greenhouses where they grow food for the tourists. The single mothers and their children will eat many of these vegetables for the first time in their life and they will have vegetables all the year round for the first time also.

The apple trees of Upper Lower Mustang and Upper Mustang are especially suited for the local climate and altitude. Growing apple trees is easier than maintaining greenhouses. Therefore, several single mothers (especially older ones), who are lacking confidence in their ability to manage a greenhouse, have opted for apple trees. We plant these trees with simple underground irrigation direct to the roots as there will be water shortages in some places and the traditional method of flooding the fields, at an altitude of 3,500 – 4,000 meters with high winds and much of the water evaporating, is not sustainable. When a tree is planted, a pipe is secured with stones next to the root. In the lower part of the pipe is a sponge. The hole around the seedling and the pipe is then filled with soil. Several times a week, depending on the season, the woman must fill the pipe with water. In this way, apple trees can be planted on fields located above a stream or at locations which are too far from the stream to be flooded, because far less water will be required.

So much for our innovations. There is also much to report from our local women. Top of the list in the number of animals is deaf-mute single mother Lama T., who has had only female calves so far and has never sold any of them. At the moment, she has seven cows/calves and both her children go to school. Lama is one of the women who would like to get a few apple trees.

Dossilamo G., the poorest of the single mothers in Chössar (three children; see travel reports 2007 and 2008), is

still living in a rock cave, which is wet during spring. By now she owns a cow and two calves. She also purchased a small piece of land on credit and has managed to carry an impressive amount of heavy rocks from the river and made a large pile of clay tiles. Dossilamo completed year 10 in school, she speaks Nepali and understands some English. She has reached an agreement with another single mother, who will mind her children and her cows during the winter. In the winter, when there is hardly any work in Upper Mustang, she wants to work for several months in Kathmandu and start building her house next year. – In Tsarang, Doka G. (travel report 2011) is saving money to build a house. She has five cows/calves, several fields and an employer who provides almost all her meals. So far, she has saved almost 200 000 Rupia (approx. 2 000 US\$).

On the whole, the women seem less stressed than in previous years. The large number of female calves and future cows has reduced the fears of the early years that something bad could happen to the only cow. Many of the single mothers have sold bull calves and were able to make purchases worth 7 000 to 8 000 Rupia – a previously unimaginable sum of money. They are no longer forced to accept any offer of work since they are producing a large part of their own food themselves. Many of the mothers are proud that they can afford the fees for a secondary school in another village (in Upper Mustang, the smaller villages have only primary schools, sometimes even only up to 3rd grade).

As always, we also met with new single mothers who will now receive a cow, such as 25-year old Sonu and 24-year old Urmila, who are both single with preschool age children. One cow or (depending on altitude) any other large dairy animal is the first assistance we can offer these women. The cow will provide milk (butter is *the* heat supplier during winter) and dung for successful farming. – We (SHN and Esel-Initiave) are observing a cultural change: While in the past, single women would get pregnant at age 35-40, now they are very young, often the prettiest girls of a village. In contrast to previous times, being a single mother has become something to be ashamed of. So it is even more important to support the single mother becoming economically independent.

Since it was harvest season, I only managed to meet three midwives this time (in Tsarang, Jhara and Samar). All were competent and reported in detail on their work. The birth rate is generally going down in the mountain villages. Since the road has been completed, the pregnant women from the wealthier families often travel to Jomsom or Pokhara to stay with relatives one to two months before their due date and then give birth in the hospital there. But the poorer women still need the midwives in their villages. Pema B. single handedly assisted a birth that lasted two days and the mother and baby are in good health. The midwife in Samar received dressings and medicines for the treatment of several minor diseases from the health centre and is now also acting as mobile health provider for three villages (after completion of her midwife training, she received a horse). "But the most important thing, and I always stress and demonstrate this, is: Wash your hands! Especially after going to the bathroom, fieldwork or working in the stable. We could prevent so many diseases, especially in children, if everybody would wash their hands properly and thoroughly more often", says Tschensom, "even the finger nails and cracks." SHN has selected 23 women from Karnali (far to the west of Daulaghiri) for midwife training.