



## **Travel report Nepal September – October 2015**

by Stefanie Christmann

*The chairperson of Esel-Initiative, Stefanie Christmann, was in Nepal in September/October 2015 to assess the project in Langtang and, after meeting with the single mothers, to discuss with the co-operation partner Sahayog Himalaya-Nepal how to best support the single mothers in the regions of Langtang and Manaslu, which were most heavily affected by the earthquakes. She mitigated the climate damaging effects of her flight with a climate levy to [www.atmosfair.de](http://www.atmosfair.de) and donated all travel costs.*

### **The effects of the earthquakes on the mountain region as a whole.**

Langtang and Manaslu were the epicentres of the more than 400 earthquakes which have occurred since 25<sup>th</sup> April 2015 measuring up to a maximum of 7.8Mw on the Richter scale. Thousands of Nepalese have lost their lives, many died later on in hospitals, while several are still in hospital.

Multi-storey, well built houses remain almost intact, while houses built solely with rocks (no cement) have been mostly destroyed. Immediately after the first earthquake, the government of Nepal provided financial aid to the earthquake victims, initially with about \$70 and later on, an additional \$150. More aid has been promised to the victims but it remains unclear when this will take place, also whether this will be one lump sum or several small payments. Most households used the \$220 for food and other purchases for direct use. Many were unable to save their cooking utensils, blankets, clothing or stock from their houses and needed to replace basic necessities. This money has now been spent and cannot even be used to partly rebuild their destroyed homes or to buy timber for construction. Many aid organisations quickly provided plastic tarpaulins (of stronger material than normal tents, but only sheets, not closable tents with a base), 12 corrugated sheets per household, food and other items. At the moment, however, it seems that the people have to fend for themselves.

Most families live in the fields under the tarpaulins, which are tied onto a scaffolding of wooden sticks. Langtang is a nature reserve. Immediately after the earthquake the prohibition to cut down trees was lifted as otherwise the people would have to live in the open air. However, too many trees being felled will increase the likelihood of landslides, which is already a threat to the villages in Langtang. So it is necessary to try to restrict felling (for house construction and fuel) as much as

possible. Some families are already living in small huts made from corrugated sheets. Only very few have used the corrugated sheets to winter-proof their partly destroyed houses. The situation in the region is devastating and without rapid support before the onset of winter (depending on altitude early to end of November), many children, elderly and ill people will most likely not survive this winter. The families are very much aware of this but only a few know how they could better protect themselves against the cold.

The fact that rebuilding is starting so slowly is not only due to the lack of financial resources, but also the many aftershocks and the specific construction design of the villages. Often, the stone houses stood wall by wall. One badly constructed house toppling over caused an entire row of house to collapse in a domino effect. Some densely built up villages, e.g. Gatlang, still look sound from a distance. But Gatlang has become a “ghost village”. The 2,200 inhabitants have left because the foundation of their houses have shifted and have holes. One small aftershock could result in falling rocks and further collapse. If just one house owner tries to rebuild their house while the neighbouring buildings remain as ruins, their instability can undo all rebuilding efforts.

### **The effects of the earthquakes on single mothers in Langtang**

In Langtang, unlike in many other project regions, the mothers are mostly widowed and they have several children. Most of them had a good stone house from the time they were married. But almost all of these houses have been destroyed and are now uninhabitable. These mothers – like those in other project regions – are now homeless and alone but with many more children. The particularly impoverished women, who lived in wooden huts, have often been more fortunate since the huts were less damaged by the earthquake than the stone houses.

In Langtang, we had allocated water buffalos and in particular cows from the region (see the travel report from 2012). Based on what we have learned so far, more water buffalos than cows were killed by the earthquake. Some animals fell to their death while grazing on the steep slopes during the first strong earthquake. Many female animals, which were kept close to the house with their small calves, were killed by falling rocks or collapsing walls. The number of animals lost, however, seems to be less than had been feared. Although many of the women have temporarily moved elsewhere due to the earthquake, I was able to meet several of those mentioned in the travel report from 2012.

As expected, road constructions have increased mobility; men have left their families; also some women have even left their children behind and have gone to Kathmandu. Sahayog is considering whether we should again systematically register the single mothers with small children (without female animals) in the large project regions Langtang and Manaslu, for a second round of allocations. As the people in Langtang live more scattered than those in, e.g. Upper Mustang, a new systematic

allocation round would be much more complex. Depending on altitude, we would allocate water buffalo, cows and naks to newly identified single mothers and/or mothers who lost their female animal during the earthquake. In any case, it is still too early for this since many single mothers are temporarily living elsewhere and could not move the animals back to their original home. Some areas, such as Haku, have been completely evacuated, as the risk of landslides is too high.

Several single grandmothers, who were indoors during the first very strong earthquake, are now mentally disabled having been hit by falling rocks. The children and their grandmothers have mostly been separated and are living with different relatives. Their respective animals have been passed on to the child/children and will continue to contribute to their livelihoods.

**Lamen T.**, whose husband died in 2012, shortly before I came to Langtang, had five children and was pregnant. She is now living with her six children in the field in a shelter made from wood and plastic sheets. She has only one blanket per person but no mats to put underneath. When food is cooked over the open fire, the smoke burns so much in their eyes that it is impossible to see anything below the low plastic sheet. A short distance away, Lamen even built a toilet with a tarpaulin. She also received corrugated sheets and intends to build a winter-proof shelter at her old house with it. But she is still afraid to go back to her damaged house because of the risk of collapse and falling rocks. Her husband had it built by an expert. It had the traditional wooden decoration and it was spacious. She will probably never again have such house. The cow was killed during the earthquake, the calf is alive but it is a male calf. Before the earthquake, she used the dung to grow enough potatoes, corn and vegetables for five months. Her three hens and four chickens, which she had bought before the earthquake, have survived. For over a month now she has been working as a day labourer in road construction. Together with a band of single mothers, her job is to improve the water runoff. The women must bring their own pickaxes, shovels etc. from home. They have been promised 400 Rupee per day (without food) but they have not been paid anything yet. The worst, she says, is that she still has debts. Her husband went abroad and died there. But not all the money he borrowed for his trip has been paid back and the creditors are hassling her to pay it back quickly because they need the money themselves.

**Many single mothers had achieved much with their animals and have held their ground even during the earthquake.**

Before the earthquake, many single mothers had markedly improved their living conditions with the help of their animals. **Miju T.**, a 79-year old grandmother, is still looking after her three grandchildren. Two of the children are still at school, the oldest just finished 12<sup>th</sup> grade and now wants to help his grandmother looking after the family. Before the earthquake, Miju had three cows and one calf but no land of her own. One cow died during the earthquake, her other animals are alive. As she

has/had plenty of dung, she was leasing land. Despite the fact that she had to hand over 50% of her harvest to the landowner, there was still enough left to feed the family of four for six months. Miju and her family could carry very little from their collapsed house. For one month, they sheltered in a self-built bamboo shed. When they received 12 corrugated sheets, they built a hut from it and this is where they are still living. Before the winter, her 19-year old grandson Tsewang wants to tear down some of the collapsed stone house and build a small house in its place with the corrugated sheets of the hut and stones. He wants to take out a loan to buy wood and also borrow \$2,000 to go to the Emirates to work and pay back all their debts.

With great tenacity, some of the single mothers were able to save at least their most important possessions. **Passang D.**, a 35-year old widow, is looking after four children. Her best dairy cow died during the earthquake but she has one more cow and one calf. She owns land and not only grows the grain for her side-line enterprise, making rakshi (a popular local alcoholic beverage), but she can also feed the family for five months growing potatoes, corn, wheat, soya beans, millet and vegetables on her well fertilized fields. For Passang it was really important to save the buried equipment for the rakshi production, with which she earns about ca. 2,000 Rupee a month. She eventually convinced soldiers from the Nepalese army to dig out all of the necessary tools from the mound of rocks. She no longer had a roof over her head and, together with her four children, she managed to stay with relatives until she received her own plastic tarpaulin and finally, the corrugated sheets. The local authority (VDC) gave her new plates and dishes. Passang expects that they must brave the winter in the tin shed. Her youngest is four years old.

Some of the mothers will most likely be able to rebuild by themselves as soon as the government releases the third payment to earthquake victims. **Langsum T.**, a widow with four children who are all still going to school sold two male calves in recent years and owns three cows/calves. She also has her own land and – fertilizing her field with dung – the harvest is sufficient to feed her large family for 6-7 months. Apart from potatoes, corn, vegetables etc., she also grows a medicinal plant (chiraito), which is used to treat colds. She sells the chiraito for 500-700 Rupee per kg to a wholesaler in Dunche (large city, two-or-three-day journey away). Langsum used the government money for food and to prepare for the rebuilding of her house. Her oldest daughter Britti wants to continue with her education and later work as an accountant in a bank.

The 57-year old widow **Kali M.**, who looks after her three daughters, now has a pregnant cow, one female and two male calves – a small herd. She does not want to sell any of her animals. Before she got the cow, she had no dung and tried to get animals from other households to graze on her land after the harvest. She was allowed to keep the dung that these animals dropped on her land during these few days. But not every year could she find willing cow owners. And even when she succeeded, her harvest was small and she had to work as a poorly paid day labourer. Now, she can

harvest enough food for seven months and is able to finance all purchases (oil, soap, school material, clothing etc.) by selling her own produce. The oldest calf, a male, is now a large ox and is yoked to the plough. As Kali does not have a son, she cannot plough herself and when the men from the neighbourhood want to borrow her ox for ploughing, they have to plough Kali's fields and carry out the heavy fieldwork in return. Kali is delighted with her cow because every morning, she gives her 2-½ litres of high-fat milk. Kali, who never went to school herself, wants to enable her three daughters to finish 10<sup>th</sup> grade. Her oldest has already achieved this. With the government money, Kali paid workers to cut wood to rebuild her completely destroyed house. She wants to start rebuilding at least a small house in time for the winter.

**Lema S.**, a 55-year old widow with two sons, lost one male calf, which had been grazing on the steep slopes at the time of the earthquake. She wanted to keep it for ploughing. But her cow and the smaller female calf were grazing on the terraces, which provided some shelter, and they survived. Together with her sons, Lema has already rebuilt her partly destroyed house with the corrugated sheets she received together with stones and wooden beams that were still usable. The harvest from her land, which she fertilizes with dung, lasts for 6-7 months. She has some extra income from selling milk but the bulk of the milk is for the family – and shared with the calf.

**Lakpa K.**, who already impressed me with her insights and her diligence during my last visit (travel report 2012), continues to be an example to others. Two of her five children are still with her. Her beautiful house fell victim to the earthquake, as did her loom with which she earned good money before the earthquake. She now weaves aprons, which she sells, using the looms of the female buyers, earning 3,000 Rupee a month. Lakpa lost the cow she had received from us and one female calf during the earthquake. But an older female calf, now already a cow, together with another female calf have survived. Her harvest, so she tells me, has improved greatly since she has so many cows. But the damage caused by more and more marauding monkeys, boars and porcupines is getting worse every year. The boars are apparently now coming right into the village. It is prohibited to shoot wild animals in the nature reserve Langtang. One son, who lives in India in a monastery, came home for a while to help his mother and younger siblings. Using the corrugated sheets, the government money and wood they could salvage from the destroyed house, Lakpa and her son managed to build a small winter-proof house, which, while obviously too small for permanent use, serves as a family home for now. The remaining waterproofing jobs will be easy to carry out.

**Yomend T.** (travel report 2012), who used to carry loads weighing 30-40 kg on long trekking tours, now has two large summer greenhouses for tomatoes. (In this region, the summer greenhouses are built with sticks and plastic sheets. They are quite different to the greenhouses we build for year-round use at a much higher altitude in Upper Mustang.) Yomend also grows cabbages and other vegetables for selling. When her water buffalo stopped gestating she sold the animal and in-

stead bought a handsome young water buffalo cow to continue to produce ghee (butter fat). She earns 3,000 – 4,000 Rupee a months selling ghee. The family is still living under the plastic sheet, but Yomend managed to make her ruined house partly habitable again with the corrugated sheets she received. Because of the aftershocks, she wants to wait for a while before she completely rebuilds her house with stones.

### **Education for the children**

Ensuring that their children can continue their education is a high priority for some mothers, even for those who only speak the local language and not Nepali. **Ang T.**, a 50-year old woman who was deserted by the father of her now 15-year old son, wants to enable him to graduate after 12<sup>th</sup> grade. In order to do this, her son has to travel to a dormitory in Galsung. Despite the earthquake, she hopes to be able to meet the costs of about 2,000 Rupee per months from selling home-produced rakshi. She lost a calf during the earthquake, but still has one cow and a female calf. She tells me that she also earns some extra money with her seven hens. Her harvest provides enough food for six months despite the fact that she also grows the grains for rakshi. With some of the government money, she has made her stone house more stable. But it is not yet stable enough to occupy. She needs money to build a winter-proof shelter from corrugated sheets and parts of her house. She cannot do this on her own and needs to pay someone to do the work. She is determined to remain in her shelter made from plastic sheets during the winter.

**Mendobri T.**, a 46-year old widow, also hopes to be able to ensure her 17-year old daughter's education beyond 10<sup>th</sup> grade. Before the earthquake, she was doing very well. Her harvest – thanks to the use of dung – was sufficient for six months and she earned 3,500 Rupee per month from selling rakshi and 1,200-1,500 Rupee from selling milk. She still has one cow and one calf. Her house was badly damaged by a large rock. Her village lies directly on a steep slope and for months, was exposed to falling rocks immediately after the earthquake. Seeking protection for herself, her daughter and her cow and calf, they walked to the more sheltered neighbouring village. Whenever she works on the fields in her home village, she salvages bit by bit the remains of her household. She is still living in the neighbouring village in a hut made from corrugated sheets. To build it, she cut wood for three days by herself.

### **The trained midwives**

I met five of the 11 graduates. All are as active as ever. Some have already supervised very many births. **Passang T.**, who lives in Gatlang, even more than 50 births. All have spent more time looking after pregnant mothers than actually supervising deliveries because they tried to dissuade

mothers from giving birth at home and encouraged them to go to the hospital instead. Apparently, they did not have to deal with premature births or miscarriages due to the shock of the earthquake. However, many family members and expectant mothers were very afraid that their babies could be blind or otherwise disabled due to the shock experienced by the mother. The midwives patiently alleviated these fears.

**Kami D.**, a trained midwife from Chilime, travels on foot to all of the far-flung villages of the Chilime district and provides help when called or whenever she meets a pregnant woman, even in distant Galsung. Sahayog is currently clarifying if she can look after a horse. If so, she will get one. Kami has supervised about 20 births to date. In one pregnant woman, she recognised the breach position of the baby early on and accompanied the expectant mother along various stops (health centre, small hospital, hospital in Dunche) all the way to Kathmandu, where the baby was finally delivered by caesarean. In several cases, she prevailed against mothers-in-law, who considered “all that talk about sterile conditions at birth” unnecessary. All deliveries were carried out in conditions as sterile as possible for a home birth in the mountains. None of the mothers acquired an infection. She also always prevented bathing the new-born child immediately after the birth in water that had not been boiled, to avoid infection of the baby. With equal persistence and ultimately successfully, she propagated cleaning the breast before feeding the baby.

**Sunnita T.** has assisted about 25 pregnant women to date. “Two deliveries were very difficult, the babies were born without problems, but the afterbirths did not come. I even had to bring one mother to the hospital for curettage. I am not able to do this myself and the woman would have died otherwise.” **Passang T.** also reported problems with the afterbirth; in many cases, she was able to bring about the afterbirth delivery through massage. – The qualified midwives still work voluntarily but all told me that the village people now take their services for granted and assume that they are paid by an organisation. Why else would they continue to come so many years after completion of their training? Kami’s comment: “The training and my work make me a richer person. I am happy that I now can help so many women.”

**News:** Sahayog is trying to bring stoves (wood and dung burning) across the Tibetan border into the Langtang and Manaslu regions, where they will be given to single mothers together with stovepipes. Later on, these stoves can be transferred from the corrugated sheet huts to the proper homes. The stovepipes will protect the families from the biting smoke (according to the UN, two million women go blind every year due to smoke from open fires) and keep the heat longer inside the room. The stove should also help to reduce the demand for wood, prevent deforestation and a resulting increased risk of landslides in both project regions. The allocation of the stoves will start in the highest villages and spread to as many villages as possible. Sahayog also wants to demon-

strate how to insulate the corrugated sheet huts with soil, dung and straw (half-timbered wickerwork which can be adhered to the inside of the corrugated sheets), which the women can make for themselves and for other families. Decisions about a second round of allocations will take place at a later stage.

We are still allocating naks in the northern part of Dolpa; the single mothers in Upper Mustang are continuing with the building of greenhouses under our guidance.

*This was the most difficult project visit in all of the 20 years of the Esel-Initiative. Langtang is very steep and the monsoon started during the months of aftershocks. Again and again, we had to dodge landslides, i.e. scramble uphill and downhill across terraces without paths. Even on these alternative routes we often encountered landslides, some of which were flooded,. This made the crossing even more dangerous. But all of us survived the project trip unharmed. We carried our own tents as well as food, kerosene etc. so as to not deplete local stocks. Since the alternative routes are unfit for mules, everything had to be carried by porters. Including myself, we were a group of 11 people. Our project visit was additionally hindered by a stop put in place by India for the delivery of all fuel, diesel, cooking and aviation kerosene to Nepal. Traffic came almost to a complete standstill; the few busses that were running took on as many passengers as in any which way they could fit inside or on top, far more than allowed for the brakes. Private vehicles could not get any fuel. We even had to walk long distances in the valley between the projects in Langtang, which we normally would have travelled by bus. Laxmi had suggested a different project region but I thought it was crucial to visit a region in the epicentre. Laxmi's health did not allow her to travel this difficult and at times dangerous route. Therefore, her 22-year old son Yogesh came with me. He mastered this diverse challenge very well.*