

## Travel report Nepal September - October 2018

by Stefanie Christmann

*The chair of the Donkey Initiative, Stefanie Christmann, was in Nepal in September / October 2018 to check the project in Upper Mustang. She has mitigated the climate damage of her flight via a donation to [www.atmosfair.de](http://www.atmosfair.de) and donated the travel expenses.*

**Fu. D.** has changed her whole life. The unmarried mother, who was one of the first to receive a cow in 2007, now has three cows and two female calves. She sold two male calves for 14,000 Rupees (1 Euro = 135 Rupees). Sometimes she sells butter, but mostly only tschurpi (hard cheese), "because for my grandmother - she is 85 years old - butter is now her most important food, which she should have. I make around 6,000 Rupees a year selling tschurpi, that's enough for me." With the greenhouse, she earns ten times that in a year: 60,000 Rupees - equivalent to 120 days as a day labourer (500 Rupees per day for a backbreaking job) - although she sells only 70% of the crop for cash. 30% is for her own consumption and for bartering (soap, salt, meat, neighbourhood help etc.). Her greenhouse is 8.60 x 6 m (the size is determined by the mothers themselves, as this depends on the size of the field). Her grandmother gave her the land for the greenhouse. She will also leave her the house.

Entering the greenhouse, a moist heat like in a sauna hits you and a mosaic of plants appears: chili, beans, cucumbers, sark (a kind of spinach or chard), tomatoes, beetroot, coriander, small areas (0.30 m x 0.30 m) in which cabbage and cauliflower have been sown and some seedlings already grow. The greenhouse is cultivated all year round, so that Fu can harvest every day. "We eat vegetables every day - and many vegetables we didn't even know about before. There used to be sark at most once a week from spring to autumn, but not always. There were no vegetables in the winter. Now I grow sark in the winter, and sell it for 15-17,000 Rupees in the winter alone, sowing tomatoes and cucumbers in March / April and harvesting cabbage. The best months for selling are the tourist months, from spring to summer and then from September to the end of October. The cooks from the guesthouses come and buy a lot. My best vegetable is beetroot and I get 250 Rupees for such a small root (slightly bigger than a table tennis ball)!" Fu also grows seeds in the greenhouse, "because this year the quality of the seeds we bought was so bad!" This is a complaint about the seeds of 2018 that I heard in all the villages. Many mothers now save their own seeds.

Fu also does day labour service, because she had another daughter nine years ago. "She should have a very good education, so she does not go to the public school here in Lo Mantang, but to a private school in Jomsom, although I have to pay 10,000 Rupees a month for that, and the remainder is paid by a sponsor." (Switzerland, SC).

## Diversity in the greenhouses



*Tschörten G. is a master of mosaic planting.*

Only a few mothers have just two or three different plants in the greenhouse, e.g. tomatoes and cucumbers (or grandmothers: white cabbage and cauliflower). Most women have 10-12 different types of vegetables at the same time, and also at different stages, e.g. salad for harvesting and freshly sown. Usually, they use the dung of their cows, but for the small sowing plots they collect goat dung. Altogether I saw: different types of tomatoes, cucumbers, three types of sark, carrots, eggplants, three kinds of beans, zucchini, peppers, coriander (grown by almost every mother), mint, various medicinal plants, cabbage, cauliflower, broccoli, lettuce, chili, beetroot, onion, local herbs, two grapevines and small apple trees. During the winter, someone had brought the apple trees to grandmother Dolma T. as her greenhouse was the only place where they could plant the tiny trees and bring them through the harsh winter of Chössar. Dolma wants to plant them out this autumn.

Apple trees are a very good business in Upper Mustang. The prices for vegetables are also high: for 1 kg of runner beans the mothers get 200-300 Rupees, for 1 kg of tomatoes 180-220 Rupees, 1 kg of sark 80-100 Rupees, 1 kg of cherry tomatoes 200-250 Rupees and a single medium-sized cucumber brings 150 Rupees. "The cherry tomatoes I sell to a guesthouse in Lo Mantang, everything else I sell here in Chössar," says **Passang G.**, a widow who still has two of her four children in the house. They both still go to school. **Tschörten G.** even uses the greenhouse temporarily to dry thin strips of meat.

The mothers devised various constructions to tie up the tomato and cucumber plants: thin strips of old prayer shawls can be seen very often, sometimes drawstring. **Passang**, a skilled weaver, plaited a horizontal floating grid of thin branches attached to the roof beam.

The mothers sell to monasteries, guesthouses and other villagers. Many guesthouses send someone who buys from the greenhouse, but some the mothers also bring their harvest to other places themselves.

I have not seen any pests or the consequences of pest infestation in any single greenhouse, and no powdery mildew on cucumber or courgette plants.

The mothers report that the first year was difficult because they had to grow vegetables that they did not even know. Not everything worked in the first year, but now they have experience.

The greenhouses are an ideal complement to field production: winter barley or winter wheat and then potatoes, buckwheat or sometimes a plant that looks like corn but does not form cobs and is grown as feed for cows. There are no vegetables in the fields, at most in tiny gardens.

Most mothers use 20-30% of the greenhouse production for their own use and bartering and the vast majority for sale for cash.

### **Changes in Upper Mustang**

Upper Mustang is changing rapidly, road construction (tracks of immense width) is increasing and distorting the landscape. Even stupas and other religious buildings are destroyed. Often the planners decide differently after digging and grading, so that, from the point of view of the villagers, there are many more tracks than would be needed. The number of tourists is increasing, many or even most of them travel the whole distance by jeep. For trekkers, more attractive trails are now being created as an alternative to the surfaced road. Some single mothers hope to gain from tourism, not only with the greenhouse, but also by renting rooms.

Putak (northern part of Lower Mustang) is located on such an alternative route for trekkers between Muktinath and Jomsom. The widow **Karsang A.** attended school up to grade 8 and is very intelligent. Both daughters have also finished class 8. During our visit in 2011, Karsang already had a bhatti (cook shop for locals) in operation. In 2017, she built a restaurant on the grounds of the house and a bhatti with additional rooms, some of them are already set up for tourists. Karsang has joined several saving clubs and has raised a total of 200,000 Rupees. She has to repay 5,000 Rupees every six months. The cow we gave her in 2008 still gives milk. Karsang has five calves from her (two males, three female). She uses milk and butter in her restaurant and sells tshurpi for 15,000 Rupees a year. The younger daughter is with

her in Putak, the older one lives in Kathmandu and has opened a shop in a hostel. Sometimes this daughter helps with repayment of the loan.

**Yangdzin G.** from Gilling also hopes to gain from tourism. The unmarried mother of two has lived in her small room since she was forced to move out from her parents during her first pregnancy. She was in very difficult circumstances with frequent rain and snow entering her room. During the 2015 earthquake, the whole house collapsed. With the help of neighbours, Yangdzin was able to salvage her furniture, cookware, blankets and supplies from the rubble. The village community gave her some unused land just outside the village and she has built a house there with several rooms. She has taken out a loan of 80,000 Rupees from the savings club for house building and has to repay 10,000 Rupees a year. She uses only one room as bedroom and living room. She also sells tea and local beer to locals. The house is located on an alternative route for travellers walking to Mustang. Yangdzin hopes to eventually use the other rooms as a tearoom for trekkers. She now has two cows and two male calves. In 2008, it was very important to Yangdzin that her children go to school. Her son has now entered a monastery, the daughter is in class 12 in Kathmandu (with sponsorship), but Yangdzin contributes 10-12,000 Rupees each year.

In Chössar, which lies further north than Lo Mantang, a mother, **Dawa T.**, hopes eventually to rent some rooms of her newly built house to tourists. The widow lost her house due to rain and a subsequent mudslide. Many villagers helped to build the new house. Nevertheless, she borrowed 200,000 Rupees from saving clubs and pays back 25,000 every year. One son is still with her, he goes to the 8th grade of the state school in Chössar, another child is in the monastery. She sells vegetables for 25,000 Rupees a year, which is just the amount she needs to repay the loan. She also does day labour in the area.

### **Cows and calves**

Some mothers now have a whole herd. Frontrunner was the widow **Tschenchen G.** with five cows (and the cow we donated, which is now put out to pasture) and four calves (three males, one female). In the meantime, she has also sold two male calves, for 15,000 Rupees each. Selling butter, she earns about 15,000 Rupees a year. She has collected a lot of hay to bring her herd well over the winter.



*To have all ten animals included in the picture, she would have had to sacrifice winter food, I did not want that.*

**Yangdu G.** from Namgyal now also has five cows, but "only" one almost adult male calf and two young female calves. She earns 15-20,000 Rupees a year selling dairy products and she sells vegetables from the greenhouse for 50,000 Rupees a year. Tomatoes, beans and zucchini are their best vegetables. Yangdu pays 6,000 Rupees a month in school fees for her daughter, who is 13 years old and attends private school in Jomsom. Yangdu still lives with her mother, but will lose the room when her brother inherits. Some single mothers benefit from siblings migrating - in the end, they may inherit some land or a house, maybe from their parents or from the grandmother, an aunt or other relatives they care for. But not everyone is lucky.

Paying rent can be very expensive. The unmarried **Dawa P.** from Lo Mantang lives with her 15-year-old son in rented accommodation, she has to pay 30,000 Rupees in cash. Earlier, when her landlord was still living in the house, she could pay the rent by working in the fields, shovelling snow, doing laundry, etc. But now, she has to work as a day labourer for 60 days just to pay the rent. Her son is in the 8th grade. Her wish is that he will continue to study after that - in Pokhara, and she will have to pay for it. At the moment, she is making 35-40,000 Rupees with the greenhouse, she has a cow and two calves, but no land except for the area on which the greenhouse stands. She therefore has to buy far more food than widows who can harvest their fields for four to six months or even the whole year round. She hopes that the grapevines will bring grapes, because she would then be the only one in Upper Mustang able to sell such fruit. Her daughter is now a teacher in Lo Mantang - a huge advancement for a daughter of an unmarried mother.

### **Mothers and daughters**

At the time when the mothers got their cows, we made it a condition that all children should go to school. Since then, most of the children of that time have completed village schools (often up to grade 5, sometimes up to grade 8 or 10), many go to secondary boarding schools. Even if tuition and board are largely sponsored by foundations, some mothers have to pay a lot of money each month. The unmarried **Jutin G.**, for example, must contribute

5,000 Rupees per month, **Yangdzin G.** from Lo Mantang around 15,000 Rupees per month. Her son goes to school in Kathmandu. Yangdzin works as a cleaner at the local administration, earning 16,000 Rupees a month. She uses 20% of her harvest from the greenhouse for her own use and bartering and earns 50,000 Rupees a year with the rest of the harvest. From this income, she and her grandmother, whom she cares for, can make a living. "I got the greenhouse at the right time, because with my salary my son can attend a good school." In addition, she sometimes works as a day labourer.

Several times I have met daughters caring for a sick or absent mother and for the first time since 1995 (when we founded the Donkey Initiative) we have held individual interviews completely in English without a translator. Laxmi just needed to listen in. The young women spoke good English, they spoke more freely than most mothers and were full of hope for the future. Both Laxmi and I had the impression that these young women represent a whole new generation, a generation with open eyes and hearts for others, more self-assured than their mothers, compassionate and helpful.

**Tsiring J.** from Tsarang is the daughter of an unmarried mother who received a cow in 2007. Tsiring lives in the monastery of Tsarang, but can take care of her now sick mother. Tsiring: "I love going to the monastery and want to stay there all my life, you have a lot of freedom there, you do not have to worry about your own needs, you get education, food and a bed, one can fully focus on learning and helping others, my life's dream is to open a home for the poor and teach them there."

In each of the four previous travel reports from Upper Dolpa (Annapurna region), I have reported on **Dossilamo G.** from Chössar. Dossilamo is an unmarried mother of three children, she lived the longest in a very wet cave, because in the spring, the meltwater penetrated the cave. No one in Chössar was in as difficult a situation as she was. She got a cow in 2007, which she still has and she also has a calf. Since her family gave her no land, she could not get a greenhouse. In the months without field work, she travels in the far-flung Manas region from village to village laden with clothes and mountain herbs and sells from door to door. In 2014, she started to build a house in Chössar. The house is now ready and occupied. One of her three children is in the 6th grade of the state school in Chössar, a son is in class 11 in Pokhara, but Dossilamo has to pay 3,500 Rupees a month. In addition, Dossilamo has been paying 3,500 Rupees a month for her eldest daughter for 12 years - plus clothing, twice a year travel allowance for visits to the mother and pocket money / school supplies for both or three children. Her oldest daughter, **Phura**, well remembers the many years in the cave. Phura is now 23, she is fluent in English and has been a math teacher in Lo Mantang for four months (for pre-schoolers and primary / 5th grade). When Phura has

holidays, she travels with her mother through the villages and helps her with the small business. Asked about her future, her first wish was: "My first priority will always be to support my mother, my second wish would be to have a bachelor's degree in education, then to teach children from the mountain villages here close to my mother. But I would need a sponsor for that."

Phura knows the Donkey Initiative cannot sponsor a bachelor's degree, but I promised to report on her wish in this travel report - hoping to maybe find a sponsor.

### **Changed situation also for midwives**

During this visit, I met only one of our midwives, **Kessang G.** from Thinkkar. As a result of road construction, more mothers go to the hospital for delivery. Also, ambulance transport is no longer made by horse, but by jeep. But poor mothers and those who have already given birth several times, still give birth at home. "All the births that I took care of went well for both mother and child. Once, I urged a mother with bleeding before birth to fly by helicopter to Pokhara. The mother survived as a result. Another time, I thought I felt two heads in a pregnant woman with a very big belly. That is very unusual here in our region, and I learned during training that twins are often born too early and sometimes even need an incubator. I also urged that mother to go to Pokhara early and deliver in the hospital, which she did. They were twins. All three are well, and the children are already so tall (approx. 90 cm, SC).

Kessang still rides on horseback every two months to several villages - Fuwa, Namgyal, Kimaling, Chungsung and others, and asks if there are pregnant women who need check-ups. Meanwhile, on behalf of the government (but unpaid), she recommends and awards funds for family planning, checks who has been vaccinated at the health centre and also who she can vaccinate herself. "The number of pregnancies has dropped a lot since I am propagating family planning," says Kessang. "Overall, I've looked after about 25 births myself since training, but most were in my first years, and the road and contraceptives have changed the situation a lot." Kessang works voluntarily throughout the year and also helps during snow and ice. The health centre in Kimaling is staffed only 8-9 months a year.

### **Our commitment in Upper Mustang**

The monasteries and modernization in Upper Mustang mean that there are almost no new single mothers. Sometimes there is a widow with little children, but hardly any unmarried mothers resulting from polyandry (only the eldest son is allowed to marry, he and his brother(s) are married to the same wife, to avoid splitting of the already small house and the few fields). In the future, we want to focus on the regions where polyandry and the resulting

shortage of men who could marry is still very widespread, such as the mountainous regions in the west, like Dolpa and Mugu. There are still many women who are unmarried mothers.

**News:** We provide the touring exhibition for free. Alternatively, a slide presentation of a travel report is available as a download on the website. In the spring of 2018, we printed new postcard sets. We do not sell postcards and posters but hope for a donation. The children's book "Kessang und Sarkini, Zwei Mädchen im Himalaya" is available in German bookstores. We continue to donate 100% to the project.

Stefanie thanks everybody for all the many wishes for recovery, which she had not expected, but which she was all the more pleased about. The project visit worked well, we want to continue the project in the Himalayas.