

## The Glacier Trust

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### Director's Newsletter January 2015

The first part of this letter makes rather depressing reading, commenting on the failure of a large international aid agency programme in Nepal. But please don't be put out by it. It makes our work all the more valuable as I hope you will see.

In the spring of 2014 I spent six weeks in Nepal viewing our existing projects and assessing new ones. First I went to the western part of Nepal which has some of the worst poverty in South East Asia and, never having been there, I spent a week with a colleague seeing how The Trust's skills could serve these communities. It was not a happy experience. The first villages we visited had already made their upland habitat unviable and were now engaging in wholesale forest destruction down slope. Cutting down mature trees is illegal under Nepal's forest management programme. Only the felling of dead trees is permitted. This is circumvented by what is euphemistically known as 'drying', a process where the bark of magnificent mature *sal* trees are ringed and the tree left to die. Once dead, it can be cut down and the timber sold. It was a bit like walking through First World War landscape. This process could not happen without the connivance of local government officials. Forestry is vital to Nepal's agriculture and economy and the UK's Department for International Development (DfID) is collaborating with Finland and Switzerland in a 'Multi Stakeholder Forestry Programme' which aims to spend \$150,000,000 on forestry programmes in Nepal over a ten year period. The programme has undoubted strengths, one of which is to halve deforestation over the period. But it has no powers to stamp out this kind of corruption and I am tremulous that such high inputs of cash will only encourage it. That would certainly be borne out by the effects of a UN based aid programme which we saw in the next communities we visited.

These villages had been targeted by the UN World Food Programmes under a scheme called 'Food for Work' which may have been a lifesaver for communities whose assets had been destroyed by the civil war. For a day's work you received a substantial quantity of rice and the idea was to give communities food security while they rebuilt their buildings and agriculture. But the programme seems to have been hopelessly mismanaged and continuing it nearly a decade after the end of the civil war has led to the



Deforestation continues apace in Sugarkhal VDC, Kailali District: Left: a mature tree being killed off to make its felling and sale 'legal'. Right: a First World War landscape of forest destruction. These are some of the challenges faced by the multi-million dollar Forestry Programme supported by British Overseas Aid.

worst aid dependency I have seen. When the aid ran out, work stopped. A school lies half built and unattended. (There were probably never any teachers anyway.) A concrete water tank lies empty save for detritus, because nobody established who owned water rights. Now all the pipes have been ripped out. One woman we met had been given multiple trainings in growing vegetables for market. She only had to attend the trainings to get her hand out. Now she grows nothing for market and is hanging in there for the next training session. The village's newly built vegetable distribution centre was closed down and made into one of the most revolting hostels I have ever slept in. Plastic vegetable crates were used for tables, chairs, bed bases, in fact anything but vegetables. This is the sad reality and very different from what you may read on the UN website under their World Food Programme pages.

Then there were unfinished village flood defence works. Gabions were piled up in stacks. (Gabions are the large wire baskets which are packed with stones and stacked along road cuttings to prevent landslip. They can cost over \$50 each and were intended to be used for flood barriers.) The villagers' imagination ran riot, creating a surreal environment and using them for balcony barriers, plate racks, police posts, chicken runs, but alas not much for river defences, leaving the village vulnerable to floods.

Worse may be to come. The next phase of the UN programme will effectively be 'cash for work'. In a mistaken view of how to generate a more liquid economy, cash will replace food for day labour on new community projects. Liquid is indeed the word. Families may see less of the money than alcohol sellers in a country where alcohol dependency and gambling are widespread. It is the UN agencies, sitting in their ivory towers in New York or elsewhere, who should stand charged with corruption because it is they who are destroying the social fabric of these villages by handing out sacks of rice for work poorly or hardly done and creating a dependency culture that causes the poverty which will take generations to eradicate.

Much of Nepal's grinding poverty results from the difficulty of communications in such mountainous terrain. The local *baat* or weekly market is often the only possible venue for exchange. Selling produce further a field is often impossible. DfID has introduced a series of Rural Access Programmes (RAP) with UK taxpayer money and involving a massive road building scheme throughout rural Nepal. On its own, this makes little difference to peoples' lives other than to increase erosion but DfID are now introducing the additional phases to the programme which will enable people to capitalise on the new infrastructure. Their website states, "... much remains to be done in the sector. \$1 billion is required over the next 7 years to achieve the Government of Nepal's access targets. This must include a threefold increase in maintenance spending, *to avoid past investments (including DFID's) being wasted*". Such expressions raise must raise huge questions for the British taxpayer about the robustness of DfID's strategic planning for the whole of their Rural Access Programme, because it now seems that the cart is driving the horse.

In western Nepal the RAP programmes are being handled by organisations such as Practical Action Nepal and Helvitas. We are extremely fortunate to have both these organisations as partners to manage our climate change adaptation projects. They do it brilliantly. However they face considerable challenges in introducing the new phase of DfID's programme (RAP 3) in this socially damaged environment. Nor is it easy to ascertain from DfID's website exactly what the present phase actually offers. However the programme is intended to develop and strengthen local business service providers such as *agrovets*, which buy agricultural products such as seeds, pesticides and fertilizers from manufacturers and sell to farmers. They also provide the capacity building and training that the farmers need to help establish them in the markets that sell their products.

Development in Nepal is particularly complex because of its wide ranging ethnic, cultural and topographical diversity. The extent to which the whole RAP succeeds will depend largely upon the time NGOs can invest in training and monitoring and this is inextricably linked to what the communities are willing to contribute in 'sweat equity'. Farmers have very limited land resources and need to be very cautious about designating these to new crops. It may take quite a couple of years of before they have the confidence to start growing anything for untested markets. Set against that, larger NGOs are anxious to keep costs of time and staff to a minimum in order to present a low overhead profile to their sponsors and the donating public. They have a very difficult balance to achieve.



Finding out what is really needed: Left: a village meeting in Dhabaha, Nawalparasi District with local NGO workers and a women's group to discuss progress with our climate change adaptation programme. Right: new crops for market proves to be a better deal than 'outworking' in Dubai.

I hope this attention to detail and programme monitoring is what The Glacier Trust can bring to the projects it funds. No project is ever perfect but our programmes in the Himalayan foothills (Nawalparasi District, being managed by Practical Action) do seem to be transforming communities from poverty to prosperity. Meeting a hill farmer from Bhandare (where we did a water transfer scheme with a climate change adaptation programme a few years ago) selling his potatoes in the local market town certainly gave me a buzz. I'm not sure whose Landrover he was driving, but he could now make good use of DfID's new road, simply because he had access to water which the community did not have before. Previously he would probably have had to spend the first part of the year working on a building site in Dubai with half his wages going to a middle man because changes in climate mean there is insufficient winter rainfall for his crops. Without our intervention, the new road would not have helped him.

We have two climate change adaptation programmes running in this area. (See illustrations above.) But it does take patience. One village group was given training in how to double the rice yield simply by planting out smaller clumps of rice seedlings with wider spaces between them. The class went fine and everybody said it was a very good idea. When the trainer came back a few days later, he saw that all the rice has been replanted along traditional lines, bunched up and close together, because *that's* the way you plant rice! So an experimental patch was agreed and now, a year later, their rice yields are on their way to doubling amid much laughter and disbelief.

Besides our two foothills projects, we have two others running at present. The first, in the Middle Mountains is being managed by *Helvitas*, contains experimental elements and uses organic pesticides to improve crop yields. (Natural pesticides include a heady mixture of fermented urine and *artemisia* among other things.) Before the turn of the century, in many Middle Mountain communities, mean-minimum winter temperatures used to hover around 5°C (fridge temperature) but periodically would drop below that, keeping both invasive weeds and insect infestations for livestock and crops in check. Since the year 2000, mean-minimum winter temperatures generally have not gone below 5° reducing some crop yields by half because of pest infestations. Obviously this has a huge impact on malnutrition. The knock on effect is that when people are on a reduced calorie diet their capacity to manage their environment collapses. The project is now past the half way point and we await its outcome with great interest. If it is as successful as early indications suggest it will be, we will have developed something that can be transferred to countless other communities.

The other major project we have is building an Agro-Forestry Resource Centre (AFRC) in Deusa village, Solu Khumbu District (Middle Mountains). Agro-forestry presents an exciting prospect. It is development of non-timber forest products, that is to say cash crops that can be grown on the forest floor. We are trying to promote this method of agriculture for a number of reasons. Some of the crops grown (*e.g.* cardamom) produce very good financial returns and develop a forest understory that delays

the rate of runoff during rainfall events. This not only keeps the soil moist and increases biodiversity but allows groundwater recharge into the aquifers that supply drinking water year round. Loss of groundwater is one of the biggest problems faced by Himalayan communities and results from much reduced winter rainfall. Overexploitation by aid agencies can also play a part. The centre will be completed next year at a cost of under £25,000 and will educate up to 80 students a year, from three districts, in simple sustainable forest technologies. Students have already started studying and using some of the facilities. They will also be taught use of computers, how to find market prices, cash management and livestock management. We anticipate that the centre will become self sustaining within a couple of years. Lifting communities from subsistence level to trading level and developing cash resources is an absolute key to their future sustainability in this rapidly changing environment.



For the future, two projects need special mention. First, the village community of Waku (population 5,000) across the valley from the AFRC in Deusa is suffering severe landsliding. Some of it is caused by ignorance of forest management which is causing the destruction of terraced field systems and badly affecting livelihoods. Landsliding is a common problem in the Himalayas, yet there is a lot that can be done to mitigate it by bioengineering (judicious planting). So we are going to do quite a substantial project there costing about £10,000 to develop both local skills and new ways of thinking. For example giant bamboos are very useful checks against erosion. They also provide valuable building material and their leaves have a range of uses. They have the additional advantage of being much quicker growing than the Nepali alder or *utis*, which is generally used for building. The longer term objective of this project is to use the nearby education centre (AFRC) to spread the word of how bioengineering is done, how it can stop landsliding and make money.



The second is an altogether bigger programme on the eastern buffer zone of the Makalu Barun National Park (sometimes called Bhotkhola), running up to the Tibetan border. It is an area of outstanding beauty, home to rare wildlife (for example red panda, one of which I was lucky enough to bump into) and very rich in biodiversity. But it is suffering from severe ecological degradation brought about by intense rural poverty and lack of understanding of sustainable agriculture. In this dynamic environment natural resources are fragile. "There will always be plenty of forest" is a widespread attitude. As a result,

Slash and burn' agriculture which is highly erosive and permanently damaging the region's forests.

deforestation, 'slash and burn' agriculture, together with a particularly erosive form of potato growing and overgrazing are all contributing to an impending ecological collapse.

The Glacier Trust, in partnership with Eco Himal Nepal and local partners, proposes to turn this vicious circle into a virtuous circle through a programme of economic empowerment. The set up cost for this is under £25,000. The programme begins with a plot scheme for about 80 households, training trainers to install improved cooking stoves and to develop soil, crop and livestock management programmes. Once these are shown how these bring in substantially better cash returns, we can extend the programme stage by stage among the remaining 950 household in the area. Hopefully it will get easier as it goes along!

Robin Garton  
5 January 2015