

Don't Call it Shangri-la



Conflict, displacement, under-development
and refugees in Nepal



Nepal, a mountainous nation in South Asia, is host to 108,000 refugees who were expelled from neighboring Bhutan 17 years ago and live in camps in southeastern Nepal. In addition, as many as 250,000 Nepalis are returning to their homes in the midwest region after 10 years of being displaced within the country due to a long-running conflict. These people are referred to as returnees.



The Women's Commission for Refugee Women and Children visited Nepal in January 2008 to look at the situation for refugees and returnees with regard to economic opportunities.

This is part of a three-year global study on livelihoods, which is examining current programs, gaps, needs and opportunities in refugee, internally displaced and returnee settings, with an emphasis on women and youth.

At the end of the project, the Women's Commission will produce a "livelihoods field manual" that will be used by people working with refugees to improve programs.

Returnees



Returnees (people who were formerly displaced within Nepal and are now returning home) face many challenges, including lack of availability of land, lack of access to markets (many villages are days away from the nearest road) and poor infrastructure. Certain groups, including children formerly associated with armed groups, widows and families of lower castes.

This former child soldier was given the fees to join a small farming cooperative. The group elders took on the role of mentor and saw it as part of their community responsibility to help him succeed. They also sent the young man to represent the group at a veterinary training workshop. Some young people also receive goats.

For every former child soldier given support, two children from the village are provided similar support.



This agro-collection center was built at the request of a conflict-affected community. The community now sells all of its goods to one agent rather than trying to sell products individually. The agent transports the goods to a larger market in the “headquarters district” of the district. Fifty percent of members are women, and they have been freed up for other activities since they have to spend less time selling vegetables. They can now save money and afford school fees for their children, as well as taking on leadership roles.



One of the most successful programs is growing off-season vegetables, for which there is a large market.

Here women are using a treadle pump to irrigate the crops. The pump is owned collectively, and helps cut down women's time working in the fields to approximately three hours a day, allowing them to spend time on other tasks.

Households use the crops they need and sell the surplus, which provides a steady income.



These women are collecting aromatic, medicinal plants as part of a bio-diversity conservation project that is working with community forestry groups. (See next slide.)



Small distillation units have been built to extract the oils from the plants instead of transporting bulky raw products. The end product (essential oils) is easier to transport and fetches a higher price than the plants. Private-public partnership have been established with Aveda and the Rainforest Alliance.



Selling at a new farmers' market guarantees returnees an income.

Bhutanese Refugees



The 108,000 Bhutanese refugees live in seven camps in southeastern Nepal. The refugees are ethnic Nepali and speak the same language as the local community. They are not allowed to work outside the camps, although it is estimated that 30 percent do so. Secondary school-age children are allowed to attend Nepali schools. Younger children go to school in the camps.



As in many refugee settings, there are some rudimentary vocational programs in the camps. Most current training programs focus on crafts, basic computer and hairdressing/hair cutting. Only about 15% of people the Women's Commission met with reported making money from skills learned in vocational training programs.

The refugees have no money to buy raw materials, and there is no market for their products within the camp.

Refugee women, men and youth stated they want to learn more advanced computer, driving, donut making, noodle making, bakery, hotel work, restaurant work, slipper and shoe-making, electronic, staff nurse training.



One highly successful project is growing mushrooms, which refugees can grow inside their houses. There is a strong market within the camps, and if that market becomes saturated, there is high demand outside.



Another successful project is making *momos* (dumplings), which are a popular item for which there is a steady market.



The Women's Commission was pleased to see some “relief substitution projects” (where refugees produce goods themselves that would otherwise be made externally and brought into the camps). Refugees in the camps are making sanitary napkins (shown here), which are distributed to all women of child-bearing age, as well as chalk, which is used in the camp schools, and soap.

Go here for more on Nepal: <http://womenscommission.org/special/nepal.php>

Namaste

