Nepal Self-Developing District Program

This summary describes how the CHOICE Humanitarian Self-Developing District Program essentially eliminated extreme poverty in the southern portion of the Lamjung District in Nepal, despite suffering a devastating earthquake mid-way through the 3 ½ year program. The keys to success were building trust between villagers and local facilitators, mentoring local leaders and families, and helping villagers base development efforts on their own priorities and core values. As individuals, villages, and government entities saw success and caught the vision, others joined in. In essence, CHOICE primed the pump and the local people made it happen.

Pre-Program: Training facilitators, collecting data, and building trust (Fall 2013)

• The Self-Developing District pilot targeted 20 VDCs (Village Development Councils) comprised of 180 villages with 13,311 families (approximately 68,000 people). Working at a multi-village level enabled local economies to be strengthened and diversified, expanding inter-village commerce.

• CHOICE recruited and trained 20 local facilitators, 10 men and 10 women, who worked in pairs with villagers in each VDC. Employing local mentors made acceptance and understanding more likely, overcoming a potential gap between outsiders and villagers.

• Facilitators collected baseline data by interviewing every family in the targeted area. Subsequently, representative samples of the population were interviewed each year as the program unfolded. This measurement provided a way to assess the impact of the program.
First Year: Building trust between villagers and facilitators through villager-determined projects (2014)

• Facilitators asked villagers to take into consideration their core values as they prioritized and planned projects. This process built trust and respect between villagers and facilitators and overcame the tendency for outside experts to impose solutions; as a result, villagers had a strong sense of ownership, a necessary element for long-term sustainability.

• Villagers and facilitators worked together on immediate impact projects in 5 core areas: health (planting family gardens), education (improving adult literacy), economic development (establishing family savings), environment (building efficient stoves), gender equity (choosing women and men as leaders), and culture preservation (making decisions based on core values). Working on projects with immediate impact helped villagers gain confidence and project management skills, experience success, and further increase their trust and respect for facilitators. In addition, a subset of villages hosted expeditions of CHOICE donors who worked side-by-side with villagers, further strengthening trust among donors, facilitators and villagers.

• In this first year, while helping the extreme poor was stated as a long-term goal of the program, projects benefitted all members of the community.

Second Year: Leadership Training, Networking, Leveraging and Establishing Cooperatives (2015)

• Families were asked to identify three men and three women from their village that they trusted and respected. A consensus process between facilitators, leaders and villagers led to selecting 20 men and 20 women from each VDC, for a total of 800 people to receive leadership training. Beyond ensuring that women’s voices were represented in community decisions, they became role models, change agents, and helped keep focus on benefiting all community members.

• Leadership training focused on three main areas: 1) principles of good governance, 2) results-based management and 3) understanding the importance of selecting leaders who adhere to the core values of their community. The latter emphasis was in preparation for local elections to be held in 2017, for the first time in 15 years. (As it turned out, many of the leaders eventually elected had participated in the CHOICE training.)

• Through role plays and discussions, leaders also learned to make additional funding proposals to, and build networks and partnerships with, local businesses, land owners, government entities and other NGOs. Thus, resources provided through CHOICE were leveraged up to ten times by others who caught the vision.

• Villagers, including the extreme poor, received training in entrepreneurship and developed their own business plans. With help from CHOICE facilitators, local communities organized economic development and savings cooperatives. A total of 1,118 businesses were created by individuals and cooperatives from 2014 to 2016. By far the majority (about 95%) were in animal (80%) and crop (15%) production, though grocery and other small businesses were also begun.

• After the devastating 7.8 earthquake in early 2015, many Nepali communities waited for help from the government or other sources. In contrast, communities where CHOICE was involved were proactive, finding solutions on their own initiative using the skills outlined above.

Third Year: Becoming “Communities of Compassion” (2016)

• Facilitators helped the upper and middle poor see the advantage of helping the extreme poor become producers and consumers rather than welfare recipients. Some villagers, especially women, began to talk about becoming a “community of compassion,” committed to bringing every extreme poor family up to a better quality of life. The concept soon spread throughout the area.

• CHOICE facilitators and local leaders guided specific efforts to help the extreme poor progress, thus overcoming the traditional disconnect between non-poor, upper and middle poor vs. extreme poor. As a result, the extreme poor benefited from economic development efforts along with everyone else.
• CHOICE staff convinced local banks to issue loans, including to the extreme poor, using community collateral. Ninety-seven percent of the loans were paid back on time, setting a positive precedent for future financial requests.

• Villagers contracted with local companies as suppliers or partners. In addition, several international corporations worked with CHOICE to link farmers with global market opportunities, thus reducing the profits taken by middlemen and increasing the income to local farmers.

Fourth to Tenth Year Plan: Formalize a District Planning Council

Forty experienced leaders (a man and a woman from each of the 20 VDCs) became an informal District Planning Committee to develop initiatives to continue to improve their quality of life, allowing CHOICE facilitators to move on to helping other communities. CHOICE sees Self-Developing District Program as a ten-year process. During the first three years CHOICE is intimately involved with local communities preparing them to bring their entire community above the national poverty level over subsequent years.

Result Highlights

The percentage of able-bodied families in the area living in extreme poverty was initially 14% (see Figure 1). By the end of the second year extreme poverty was cut in half and continued to decline dramatically to near zero after 3 ½ years.

Another important way to assess program impact was villager perception of their quality of life, using items based on the Gallup Quality of Life Survey. The increase in satisfaction from the baseline (late 2013) to the final survey (mid 2017) is shown in Figure 2. Nine out of ten of the variables showed positive change, with satisfaction with local leaders and educational attainment topping the list. The decline in perceived support from family and friends may represent an adjustment to others becoming more involved in training and economic development and/or dealing with the effects of the 2015 earthquake.
Figure 3 reveals that the level of CHOICE funding for the Nepal Self-Developing District pilot was fairly constant over time. However, the contribution from other funding sources grew dramatically as they observed the success of the program. This clearly demonstrates the program’s effectiveness in helping villagers leverage resources to meet their development needs.

Figure 4 summarizes the contributions from non-CHOICE sources. Contributions from the central government, VDCs, and the villagers themselves saw 20-fold, 2-fold, and 3-fold increases, respectively.

**Villager Profile: Kritika and Nawaraj Poudel**

Kritika and her husband, Nawaraj, labored for other farmers but were unable to make a decent living or save for their children’s education. Kritika borrowed the equivalent of $250 to start her own vegetable farm. She was so successful that her husband, Nawaraj, quit his job to work with her.

However, for most of the growing season, they could only sell a portion of their crops to merchants at a very low price. The solution came when CHOICE Nepal built the Agriculture Collection Center with the support of the District Agriculture Department in Bhorletar, thus eliminating the need for middlemen. At the center, farmers sell their crops at a fair market price.

Kritika and Nawaraj now make nearly double their previous income. They plan to increase their production by leasing land and to cultivate crops based on market demand. Kritika is encouraging every family to bring their crops to the collection center market. “That is how we can eliminate poverty from our village!”

**Conclusion**

The Nepal Self-developing District Program was highly successful in helping villagers to lift themselves out of extreme poverty in just 3½ years. A key component was establishing trust and understanding with local leaders who developed a sense of stewardship and made decisions based on their community core values and needs. Involving both women and men in leadership roles and seeking input from all community members resulted in unity and collaboration. Providing training in entrepreneurship and building networks with local government, business, and nonprofit entities led to successful businesses and cooperatives.

**Call to Action**

The total CHOICE financial contributions alone (not including funds leveraged from the central and local government and other NGOs) to move 1,834 families out of extreme poverty effectively cost $140/family/year. The district-level programs and projects, however, positively impacted all 13,311 families with whom we worked. As previously mentioned, working at a district level is essential to successfully eliminating extreme poverty. CHOICE plans to shorten the DDP (District Development Program) duration to 2 - 2 ½ years, and to also work in smaller districts. The next two DDPs slated for implementation are in Nepal ($300K needed to move 1,000 families out of extreme poverty, while positively impacting a total of >7,200 families) and in Ecuador ($187.5K needed to move 500 families out of extreme poverty, while positively impact impacting >3,600 families). CHOICE further plans to implement the DDP in the other countries where we work (Peru, Guatemala, Bolivia, Mexico, and Kenya). We are accelerating our efforts to help achieve the UN Post-2015 Millennium Development Goal of eliminating extreme poverty worldwide by 2030.

We invite you to join us in this life-changing effort!