

Breaking the silence

For ten years, Nepalese fought Nepalese in a conflict which divided the country and left a trail of destruction and poverty – especially in rural areas. In the districts of Rukum and Rolpa, the Maoist rebels established a parallel government, while the official government was entrenched in the district headquarters. People mistrusted each other. Can a German International Cooperation project work successfully in such a fragile environment?

The Nepali society has always been characterised by a strong economic, social and geographical marginalisation of large parts of its population. The central governments in Kathmandu have always neglected people in the rural areas. As a result, infrastructure as well as access to state services has remained marginal through the times.

Nepali society as a whole is governed by patriarchal norms and values. Therefore, the majority of women from all castes and ethnicities are traditionally excluded and marginalised. The *Global Gender Gap Report* (2011) of the World Economic Forum places Nepal rank 126 out of 135 countries. So-called lower castes are similarly excluded from public life.

The different manifestations of exclusion and the resulting high rates of poverty and unemployment, the unequal distribution of resources and food insufficiency were the root causes of the civil war from 1996–2006. Today Nepal ranks 157th in the *Human Development*

Index (2011) and is one of the poorest nations world-wide.

■ Heartland of the insurgency

It is no coincidence that the districts of Rukum and Rolpa were the heartland and starting points of the insurgency. They were specifically chosen by the Maoists when they travelled the country to spread their ideas before going underground. Here, all of the conflict's root causes were particularly pronounced, and here, the goals of the Maoists were mostly met with sympathy. At the same time, people did not have a choice, but were compelled to go through all the hardship of the hostilities between the Maoists and the government forces.

The mere mention of Rukum and Rolpa triggered fear in the capital and vast areas of the country. Media controlled by the government and the king further boosted their negative image.

The atmosphere in the districts during the conflict was characterised by widespread mistrust and speechlessness of the population. Many families were divided and torn apart when some of their children were recruited by the Maoists, and some by the opposing government forces. Furthermore, the insurgents also often forced children to fight for their cause. The Maoists established a parallel so-called *People's Government* and declared Rukum and Rolpa

the new *Magarat Autonomous Region*. The radius of official Nepali state institutions was reduced to a fenced area in the district capital.

The social and economic consequences in the conflict areas were enormous. The districts were isolated by the government, no goods were allowed to enter, and no social and economic services were provided. During the conflict time, the food situation worsened drastically, and the already rudimentary infrastructure was mostly destroyed or damaged, which further limited access to markets and services.

Claudia Maier
Programme Manager
Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit (GIZ) GmbH
Kathmandu, Nepal
Claudia.maier@giz.de

Dominik Langen
Consultant
Kathmandu, Nepal
Dominik.langen@gmx.net



Processing agricultural products creates new jobs.

■ Searching for the breakthrough

Given the aggravated food crisis in the conflict, the German Government, in co-operation with *Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit* (GIZ) was ready to support the people of Rukum and Rolpa out of the *Emergency and Transition Aid Fund*. The minimum basis for attempting to work in Rukum and Rolpa was an agreement with the government in Kathmandu (only information, no co-operation) as well as acceptance by the Maoist rebels. The clear tendency of the rebels was rather to diminish external influence and chase all actors. Thus, the programme manager and a Nepalese staff member went to Rolpa to seek the approval of the Maoist leaders.

After four days of walking and talking to lower ranks, the district-level official in charge of the *Magarat Autonomous Region*, Santosh Buda, suddenly



Photo: giz

showed up in their hotel room in Thabang. That talk decided whether the project would perish or survive. The modest presentation of the project aims with a focus on fighting hunger and improving infrastructure finally convinced Mr. Buda and gave GIZ the chance to prove itself. But definitely, a high pressure to produce fast impacts lay on our shoulders.

■ Setting the frame

The offices were not located in the fenced district capitals, but directly in the project area, so that access was possible at any time for the target group and the Maoist cadres. Frequent visits to the district government and the security forces established a balance of communication. Practically all staff were stationed in the field and stayed at houses of the local population.

A baseline survey was unthinkable during the conflict. From the very beginning, the project was based on flexible indicators, because it was unclear what could be achieved under

the conflict circumstances. According to the respective scope given, the project ranged from technical to social activities. The Maoists considered social mobilisation as their proper domain. GIZ was considered provider of "hardware". Therefore, the first activity was road construction, where hundreds of people immediately received food and cash for their work. However, the accompanying "software" was the introduction of basic democratic rules, public audits and an equal wage policy in the work gangs. Public audits permitted GIZ to demonstrate complete transparency regarding the use of funds and were much appreciated by the Maoists later on.

■ Communication is the key

Every step of the project staff was monitored either by the Maoists or by the security forces. Thus each word spoken, or even each facial expression, could have had irreparable consequences for the project or the individual. Continuous extensive communication was the main instrument to prevent damage in the fragile conflict environment. From programme manager to messenger, all staff had to be clear about the "dos and don'ts", especially because the complete lack of telephone facilities



Photo: giz

Women have become an indispensable part of Nepal's public life.



Photo: giz

New confidence through mastering new challenges – like road construction.

impeded spontaneous co-ordinating among staff members. Communication training helped to incorporate the strategy. Guidelines and places of permanent exchange were:

- Time to communicate shared between the conflicting parties in a balanced manner.
- Terminology already claimed by the Maoists replaced (use supervisor instead of mobiliser, local problem solving instead of conflict resolution, etc.).
- Regular internal staff meetings to reflect and revise the strategy.
- Binding monthly work plans transmitted to security forces, government and Maoists to maintain transparency.
- Message system established for staff between nearby work sites. Updates given every two days. Notes and messages often passed (and read?) by villagers.
- Reports of District managers to the district government and development stakeholders in monthly meetings.
- Delivery of goods had to be channelled via a commission of security forces, the army and the *Ministry of Local Development* in Kathmandu. Only then did the check-posts let the trucks pass.
- Public audits step by step re-established open discussions.

be more effective than to address a person directly, because it left her or him with more freedom to react or just turn a blind eye on an issue. Communication was the key that dissolved upcoming tensions continuously and opened the doors to the heads and the hearts of the people.

■ Managing the risks

The project had a helping hand in the *Risk Management Office* (RMO), which was established in 2002. Funded by GIZ and the United Kingdom's *Department for International Development* (DFID), it was the first Office of its kind, but was often copied afterwards.

The RMO provided valuable information for the staff in the field through daily risk assessment reports, communication and risk management training for field staff and drivers, and frequently asked questions regarding donations and mainstreaming of procedures via the development of *Standard Operating Procedures* for the project work and the *Basic Operation Guidelines* signed by various donors.

The great benefit of RMO was to lift the threats that were felt by each staff member working in and on the conflict from an individual to a collective level. They helped GIZ mainstream the

actions and gain strength out of acting in a united manner within the project and in line with other actors.

■ Selection of staff – living up to one's own principles

The quality of implementation depended on the capacity and sensitivity of staff. Thus the selection process was delicate. Composition was to reflect the project's principles, be balanced in terms of gender, caste and ethnicity and integrate local people. At the same time, it would have been fatal to hire politically infiltrating staff. In a first step, consultants were hired to explore road alignment. The capable and loyal technicians were offered a contract afterwards.

Social mobilisation was first run by a local NGO, but after frequent hiccups with the Maoists, the contract was terminated. The NGO was then expelled by the Maoist side. In retrospective, co-operation with the NGO increased the risks for the project because the discipline and communication of the NGO staff could not be mainstreamed in the same way as the performance of internal staff, which ultimately put project efforts at jeopardy. Nevertheless, some party-affiliated persons managed to enter the team. Whenever detected, the project had to replace them in a diplomatic way, because the risk of backbites to the project was extremely high.

At the beginning, the potential of staff members – especially of local women – was not fully explored, and mostly, they remained inconspicuous. Then they slowly received more responsibilities according to a monthly working plan on which they had to report back. They grew with their responsibilities and became self-assured and vocal.

Working for GIZ was risky for the local people, because the Maoists had to approve them and watched them

suspiciously. Moreover, they were exposed to bombings and shootings and could not even contact their families. The nearest public telephone was outside the project area, and they had to queue for hours for a short talk.

After the initial struggles, the staff composition reflected the project principles. Women and men were balanced, and lower castes and other marginalised groups were strongly represented and fully respected members of the team.

■ Civil society boosts development

The social balance within the rural communities was of essential importance in the integration of Ex-Combatants after the end of the conflict and for sustainable peace. The backbone of the social mobilisation process was a network of newly established user and self-help groups with basic democratic rules and elected steering board members. The groups as well as the steering boards consisted of at least 50 percent women. Furthermore, 20 percent of the members were lower caste Dalit.

Participatory Learning Centers (LCs) proved to be very effective instruments to boost social inclusion and thereby counter one of the root causes of conflict. They addressed the needs of marginalised groups such as women, lower castes or people with disabilities and offered them opportunities for social and economic empowerment. The participants learned to read and write, received training in income-generating activities (e.g. agriculture) and used

them as a platform to discuss and solve social issues. Further, LCs conducted social and hygiene campaigns, as well as campaigns against domestic violence, alcoholism and discrimination. With their new capacities, the members started earning money, and part of it went to the saving and credit schemes of the Learning Centers. Upon request of the villagers, they started intervening in local disputes and received refining training from the project side. Nowadays, the participants of the LCs are respected members of the rural society and continue to motivate their compatriots to go ahead in development.

Of utmost importance overall was the introduction of free expression and discussion in all self-help groups – the opposite of the culture of speechlessness that was so common during the conflict.

■ Stable achievements in a fragile environment

After the urgent food crisis was alleviated through Food and Cash-for-Work measures, sustainable social and economic activities could be conducted. Through the construction of roads, schools, service centres, water supply and irrigation, access to services

and markets as well as the food security and health situation have been drastically improved.

Social balancing in terms of gender and caste was fundamental. In all project activities – and especially in the LCs and self help groups – marginalised groups were overrepresented. They were soon identified as the main forces for development and received full support.

Through Learning Centers, marginalised groups of society have improved their social and economic status, gained income of their own as well as independence and continue to advocate for disadvantaged persons and for development.

Today, people from the project area have overcome caste discrimination; lower and higher castes eat, work and live together (LC Assessment 2009). This new solidarity and the courage to raise their voices are giving them strength to face new challenges and to take the district government under accountability – just like civil society is supposed to act.

The project team still stays in close contact with many of the people there, and we are optimistic that they will make it!



The women from a Learning Center enjoy winning first prize at an agricultural fair.

Photo: giz