

SAHAMATI

RATNA SAPKOTA · NEPAL

SAHAMATI is a domestically established Non-Governmental Organization (NGO) started in 2001 by a group of 21 people committed to community development. To date, they have completed 61 projects with 65,000 families in 23 districts of Nepal and are currently engaged in eight projects in five districts. Many of its staff of 77 (35 of whom are women) work on a volunteer basis. Of the nine executive committee members, one is a single woman, and one is a Dalit ("untouchable"). Inclusion of both is a significant social achievement in conservative Nepali society. Ratna Sapkota was one of the founding members and is presently serving a three-year term as the organization's president.

SAHAMATI incorporates a people-led approach, forming cooperatives in areas such as agriculture, dairy, and health. The health co-op, for example, has 1,300 members and is now running a community hospital that is open around the clock. It is accessible to everyone, but co-op members receive a discount. Other programs include creation of an early warning flood alert system. Upland people monitor river levels and communicate via text messages to lower areas when water levels are on the rise. Warnings are then broadcast by radio. Since it takes five or six hours for water to reach the lowlands, people have time to get their families, possessions, and livestock to safety. To provide a marketing advantage, SAHAMATI has assisted communities with the construction of seven zero-energy cold storage units. Built with double rock walls filled with sand and fitted with piping that allows for water to flow when more cooling is needed, these units make it possible for farmers to store produce until the off-season when it can be sold at higher market prices.

Once they have completed the empowerment process in a community, SAHAMATI withdraws slowly to allow the people to take over and continue to develop themselves independently. However, it does provide follow-up as necessary. The organization also makes people aware of available government services and their right to access them, as it believes that, ultimately, it is the government that is responsible for the people.

One village that SAHAMATI has been working with intensively is the ethnic Magar community of Kirtipur, located in the "hilly area" – the term Nepalis use to refer to the formidable range of mountains that stretches between the Himalayas and the Terai Plains. At the time of Ratna's first visit to Kirtipur, the only access was via a narrow footpath that took several hours to traverse. When he arrived, hot and tired, there was no water for the villagers to offer him. They cut up cucumbers to stem his thirst. People could plant only in the rainy season, and during the long periods of dryness, they relied on slash and burn farming. The landscape had become so denuded of trees that small animals could be seen scampering across the slopes. Such conditions only exacerbated the region's susceptibility to drought. Ratna wondered how these people could live in such an environment.

Today the trees are growing again through the establishment of a community forest that is cared for by the village's forest management group. This was made possible by the introduction of an irrigation system that pipes water from higher up and allows for year-round farming in the terraced paddies and gardens. Villagers plant corn once the rice is harvested, giving them two annual crops. After learning about vegetable cultivation in a 12-week farmer field school training, they now grow vegetables in abundance – something that was unimaginable a few years before. Their soil is very fertile, and some have even started farming for commercial purposes. The only way to get produce to market, however, is by carrying it in a basket, called a *doko*, on their backs. Prices tend to be lower down in the plains, so they prefer to take their goods higher up in the mountains where less availability to fresh produce creates a better market.

Earlier there had been no toilets, and feces were everywhere. SAHAMATI provided funding to build concrete bases, on which the community constructed 66 stone toilets, one for every five families. As is customary in the villages, people shared quarters with their livestock. To further improve sanitation, pigs and cows were moved to detached sheds with cement floors. Goats, however, are still free to roam and are often fed right out of the front door. Plans are in the works to build new pens even further from people's homes, including for the goats.

The village's communal activities and resources are managed through its cooperative within the requisite committees. Profits are shared, and there is no need for an outside bank as the co-op manages its own savings and loan system. Co-op meetings take place in the community hall, where an all-important stock of PVC piping is stored in the rafters. Their water line is vulnerable to rock slides and harsh weather, but the co-op is able to manage its own repairs and maintenance on it. Indeed, it is the irrigation system that the villagers hold as their most valuable achievement. After 100 years of eking out a living through shifting agriculture, the water brought in from above to feed their lands has changed their lives dramatically. Without the need to purchase food from outside, they save money, which is then used to improve their homes, buy better clothes, and most importantly, educate their children. Even girls are now being sent to school, which was a rarity in the recent past. These successes have emboldened them enough to solicit the local government for assistance, and today a new road winds its way up to the village.

One woman leader in the co-op, Kumari, marvels that, "*Before, we [women] did not even say our names.*" Her heart was pounding the first time she went to a training event on vegetable farming, pig rearing, and bee keeping, but the experience quickly built up her confidence. She feels the community is now very united. Ratna states, "*[It is] always in my mind we have to do with the community, for the community,*" and though the people of Kirtipur were at first skeptical of SAHAMATI, they soon came to understand that, "*the activity is for us, so we need to continue for us... not the NGO or government, but for us.*"

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(1) CAMEROON Distribution of lambs and piglets to women who took part in a SHUMAS short program on animal rearing; (2) NEPAL Ratna Sapkota (right) converses with a Kirtipur villager.