

IMPROVING FOOD SECURITY FOR VULNERABLE COMMUNITIES IN NEPAL

This case study describes the struggle faced by poor communities in highland Nepal to produce and buy sufficient food. It explores how Oxfam is working with local organizations to provide sustainable long-term and short-term responses to the problems of food insecurity and climate change in the region.

INTRODUCTION

Nepal is one of the world's poorest nations, with 31 per cent of its 28 million-population living below the poverty line. Chronic food insecurity and hunger are part of daily life for millions of Nepalis. For families living in Nepal's remote mountain regions in particular, getting access to sufficient food is a daily struggle. Climate change is making the situation worse.

This case study explores the reasons why Nepal is so vulnerable to food insecurity and hunger, and describes what Oxfam is doing to help improve food security for women and men living in remote parts of highland Nepal.

WHY IS NEPAL SO VULNERABLE TO FOOD INSECURITY?

More than half of the population of Nepal lives in remote hill and mountain regions. Agricultural development in these areas has been neglected for years, and food production fails to meet the needs of the population. Low production is compounded by climate insecurity. Consecutive winter droughts combined with a poor monsoon in 2009 left around 3.4 million people in need of food aid.

People living in many parts of the country are reliant on expensive food imported from India. Research undertaken during the 2008–2009 food price crisis showed that the poorest rural families were spending 78 per cent of their income on food (United Nations World Food Programme and Nepal Development Research Institute 2008), making them highly vulnerable to food price volatility. When food prices go up, households are forced to sell assets, to make cuts in the household budget, and to take on debts – forcing them into a vicious circle of deepening poverty.

Relying on imported food

Since the 1990s Nepal has been reliant on food imported from India to feed its growing population. Imported food is more expensive than food produced locally, because of transport costs. In October 2007, India placed a ban on the export of the non-basmati rice that was being imported and sold to poor people in Nepal. This export ban drove food prices up even higher. Between March 2008 and March 2009, food prices rose by 17.1 per cent in Nepal (United Nations World Food Programme 2009). In response, the World Food Programme (WFP) started distributing food to an estimated 23 per cent of the population in the most affected areas, and the government-run National Food Corporation (NFC) transported rice to 30 districts at subsidized prices.

Missing men

Households in the highlands of Nepal cannot rely on food production alone. In these regions, 75 per cent of families have at least one male family member who migrates – usually to India – for work to support the family income. These men may be gone for as much as 11 months per year, working as guards, servants, or in restaurants.

While the men are away, women and children struggle to cope by eating less, consuming their stocks of seeds, selling livestock and other assets, undertaking wage labour, borrowing from moneylenders, and buying on credit with traders,

incurring large debts. In many cases, the money that the men bring back is barely enough to pay these debts.

Climate change

The people of highland Nepal are feeling the effects of unpredictable weather patterns. In the summer of 2008 they ploughed their fields, planted their seeds and the monsoon rains came on time, resulting in good local harvests, and a bumper rice harvest in the Terai plains. The following winter they ploughed their fields, planted their seeds, and the rain did not arrive, resulting in one of the worst droughts on record. A chronic food crisis developed leaving more than 3.4 million people in these regions in urgent need of food. Increasingly unpredictable rains are likely under climate change scenarios.

BUILDING FOOD SECURITY IN NEPAL

Distributing food to remote mountainous communities is expensive. WFP and the National Food Corporation (NFC) buy rice in the Terai District – Nepal’s flat paddy farming plains – and transport it to the hill and mountain areas. The villages that are most in need of food assistance are remote and isolated. The only way to reach these communities with food is by helicopter, tractor, mules and porters, making the transport costs twice as expensive as the cost of the rice.

Given rising global food prices and less predictable rain patterns, these responses are becoming increasingly expensive and unsustainable. In contrast, Oxfam’s food security programme aims to tackle the root causes of Nepal’s food shortages by linking emergency food relief with longer-term food security initiatives that focus on improving farm productivity and income generation.

Oxfam is working with local partners to help 37,500 people (6,250 families) in 15 remote and isolated communities in the Dadelhdura and Dailekh districts of the Far- and Mid-Western regions (the two poorest regions in Nepal). Oxfam’s long-term aim is to help these communities become more self-sufficient and less dependent on food aid. Oxfam also hopes that the success of this programme will convince others to adopt programmes designed to tackle the root causes of food insecurity, so that unsustainable food support can be gradually reduced.

Box 1: Oxfam’s food security programme activities at a glance

- Support for the creation, management, and maintenance of micro-irrigation schemes, to increase farm productivity.
- Support for the creation, management, and maintenance of community seed and grain banks.
- The promotion of improved seed varieties
- Cash-for-work schemes to build infrastructure that will support improved food security, such as micro-irrigation systems and seed/grain banks.
- Training communities (especially women) on new farming techniques and trial new crop varieties.
- Distributing tools and improved drought-resistant seeds.
- ‘Participatory learning’ classes to support the development of women’s knowledge and leadership skills.
- Building market linkages between communities and traders.

Food distribution schemes with a difference

During the 'hungry' months of 2010 (February–March and July–August), Oxfam distributed food through a voucher system to help the most vulnerable people, women in particular. Oxfam's food voucher scheme differed to that of WFP and NFC because Oxfam was working with local shopkeepers to supply food to the poorest families in each target community. The families were selected by the communities themselves and given the choice of what foods to buy, and when and where to buy them.

Oxfam distributed 1000-rupee vouchers to the most vulnerable 25 per cent of households in each target village. That's enough to buy one month's supply of food for a family of six to eight people. The vouchers were used to pay for food in local shops. Oxfam then paid the shopkeepers the value of the vouchers.

By giving the communities and recipients greater control and choices than would be usual in a standard food distribution programme, Oxfam aimed to make the experience of receiving food aid more empowering for individual recipients and for communities. By working with local traders and shopkeepers, the programme supported local businesses rather than undermining them.

Bhagirathi Gurung, a community-based mobiliser, describes how recipients were selected: 'The areas that I work in are extremely remote. The communities are Dalit families [from the 'untouchable' caste] and they are very, very poor. As part of this project we have to select the most vulnerable 25 per cent from each community... It is really very difficult because they are all poor and they are all vulnerable.'

Everybody has a small piece of land, so we calculate how much each household is able to produce. We also take into consideration whether they are able to earn money by doing other work. ... Many of the people selected are single women, disabled people, and those caring for disabled people. After the most vulnerable are selected we let them decide which food they need the most. The options we give them are rice, wheat, oil or lentils. Almost all of them chose rice because right now wheat is more expensive to buy, oil they can get from ghee, and rice lasts longer.'

Tirtha Raj Chataut, is the owner of a local general store that participated in the Oxfam distributions:

'It's different from the WFP distribution system because the WFP does not buy rice from local traders. This voucher system is better because it is enhancing the income of local traders and that is really important.'

Usually, on a good day, I would sell around 40 sacks of rice, and today it's 70. But for me, it is also important to be able to help my community... Because we are bringing such large quantities of food here, I can pay local people to unload the trucks. Today I employed five people from the local area.'

On the day of the distribution, Radha Joshi was considering what to buy with her voucher: 'I am going to buy rice with my voucher. If I am careful and only have rice once a day, or mix it with wheat flour, it will feed my family for a month. There are four of us in our family – my husband, my two sons and myself. My husband is not at home at the moment because he has very bad asthma and had to go to hospital. I had to borrow money and sell my land in order to raise enough money to pay for the hospital and the medicine. ... When the rice runs out we will have to sell our goats or borrow money to buy more food.'

Improving water management in remote rural communities

As rainfall in the highlands of Nepal becomes less reliable, traditional rainfed agriculture systems can fail. Oxfam is supporting communities to build and manage micro-irrigation systems, to enable them to reduce their reliance on rain. Oxfam provides technical support, money to employ skilled and unskilled workers, construction materials, and training for community members – especially women – on how to build and manage the systems – and to fix them if they go wrong.

The micro-irrigation systems channel water from a local spring or river into a central reservoir in the village. From there, the water is piped to individual farms. Such a system takes 80–100 people around three weeks to build, and can serve up to 25 households. Multiple systems can be built for larger villages. Community members (women and men) are paid to build the systems, boosting the incomes of participating families.

Tulsi Thapa, a social mobiliser with the programme, explains what irrigation systems could mean for her community: 'Lack of water and irrigation is our biggest problem right now. The place is very dry and everyone is very concerned about food. The rain doesn't come on time any more, we can't rely on it to water our crops and the last few summers have been getting very hot. If we can build an irrigation system then our production will increase.'

There are 80 people from the village involved in building the irrigation system: 50 women and 30 men. We need it so urgently that we are working really hard to get it finished. The whole thing should be finished in about a month and a half. Once it is done it will benefit 52 households, but we want to extend it so that every household in the village will benefit. Once we can channel the water to our fields we will be able to grow all kinds of vegetables – leafy greens, tomatoes, potatoes, cauliflower, cabbage, even rice, which is currently not grown here at all. The aim is that once we are able to start growing plenty of food in the village the men will stay. We need more money for the bigger irrigation system, but if we manage to implement it properly the migration will stop and our community will be able to develop.'

Managing seeds and grains for productivity and profit

Good quality seeds in sufficient quantities are essential for good harvests. Poor farmers in the remote mountainous regions of Dadeldhura and Dailekh have been using the same seeds for generations. Due to frequent droughts, poor harvests, and a lack of know-how, the quality of these seeds has declined. Oxfam is training farmers in new farming techniques, distributing improved drought-resistant seeds, and paying community members to build seed and grain banks. These will allow farmers to manage and store improved seeds from season to season, enabling them to grow larger crops even in the face of climate variation.

A Seed Management Committee will select the best grain from each participating farmer and store this as seed. This means that the best grain in the community becomes the seed stock for next year.

Training the community about the importance of developing, multiplying, and managing their seed supply ensures they will always have seeds to plant for the next season. It also allows the community to make the most from market prices, by storing excess seeds and grain safely when market prices are low, and selling them when they are high.

Bahadur Thapa is a great-grandfather, with years of experience of farming. He is impressed with the seed management project: 'This is the first time I have used the drought-resistant seeds and I have been really impressed with the results. We used exactly the same process and techniques that we have always used, but our wheat and potato harvest this year was the best I've ever seen. This wheat is very different from the local wheat that we have been producing in the past. It's better in structure, better in quality and it produces a larger harvest. The grains we harvested last month were much bigger and tastier than we have ever experienced before. We selected some very good seeds to save for the next planting season.'

Training Nepali women to be leaders and experts

Because so many men from these remote communities migrate for months on end, women increasingly take on the job of keeping households, farms, and communities running in their absence. Many of these women struggle with the workload this entails, compounded by the challenges of crop failure and food insecurity, and of widespread gender discrimination.

Sabina Devi Saru Magar misses her husband, who has been migrating since they were married. 'I only see my husband for one month a year... The rest of the time he works as a servant in a house for rich people in India, in the Punjab. ... He really doesn't like working for them in their house but he is forced to go because our production is so bad. I know that he would like to stay here with his family and not have to go to India. I miss him so much when he is away. It is particularly bad when I am sick or when it's time to plough the fields. I find it awkward to ask my brothers-in-law to help me. If my husband were here I wouldn't ever need to ask him, he would just be out there doing it. I do find these times really difficult.'

After years of migration, Yema Gharti's husband eventually stopped coming back to the village, leaving her to cope alone: 'I haven't seen my husband for 16 years. He is in Surkhet now with his new wife. When we were first married he used to migrate there for work, then one year he just didn't come back. At first, I found it very difficult to survive on my own. When a woman is left on her own in our society people have bad feelings towards her. I struggled to find enough food for my son and myself on my own with no support from my husband... But after a while I got used to it. I had to face it and work harder.'

Oxfam has developed 'participatory learning' classes, tailored to the needs of the poor women in these communities. These evening classes are an opportunity for women from marginalized groups to meet, solve problems together, and learn new skills. The classes are led by women selected from within the community.

Class leader Krishna Rane describes their activities: 'At PLC we identify problems that people are facing. We talk about the problems together so that we can identify different solutions. We work on one problem at a time and we stick with that problem until it is solved. The biggest problem we face at the moment is the lack of water to irrigate out land. This is why we are building an irrigation system. Once this problem is solved we will move on to the next.'

For Rajmati Panta, the classes 'help women to understand that what they have to say matters. It gives them courage to come forward.' Through these classes, women are becoming more confident and articulate in understanding the underlying reasons for their food insecurity, and in developing strategies to change their situation. They are linking to national advocacy networks so that they can become more active in demanding effective food security policies and strategies for poor Nepali communities.

LOOKING FORWARD: THE FUTURE FOR FOOD JUSTICE IN NEPAL

Food security programmes in rural Nepal are bringing hope for a future where agriculture will be more productive, and where men and boys can remain at home and farm instead of migrating for low-paid and insecure work in India. In the meantime, the focus on supporting women to be more confident and self-sufficient is helping them to assume the wider range of responsibilities they face, and is an investment in the future of the communities.

Tulsi Thapa spells out her vision for the future:

'With the men away and our crops fail, it is hard for us to find food. We have to sell our goats, pigs, chickens and eggs to survive.... If we could have access to irrigation then we would be able to grow much more here in the village. If we had access to improved seeds and grain then we could grow better quality food. And if we could let people know about all the vegetables that we had here then we could sell them and that would solve the problem. If this can be done then the men would not need to migrate. I believe that this can be done. It is definitely possible. When it is done then those men who haven't returned for years will come back too and this community will develop.'

At a glance: food insecurity in Nepal

Population food-insecure: **6.4 million = 20 per cent** of the population

Proportion of children suffering from acute malnourishment: **13 per cent**

Food prices rises, March 2008 to March 2009: **17.1 per cent**

Proportion of income that the poorest families spend on food during hungry months: **78 per cent**

Proportion of households in the highlands with at least one male who migrates: **75 per cent**

Source: *Oxfam International 2009*

References

Oxfam International (2009) 'Even the Himalayas have Stopped Smiling: Climate Change, Poverty and Adaptation in Nepal', Oxford: Oxfam International, http://www.oxfam.org.uk/resources/policy/climate_change/climate_change_poverty_nepal.html

United Nations World Food Programme and Nepal Development Research Institute (2008) 'Market and Price Impact Assessment Nepal: Final Report', July 2008, Kathmandu: UNWFP.

United Nations World Food Programme (2009) 'The Cost of Coping: A Collision of Crises and the Impact of Sustained Food Security Deterioration in Nepal', Nepal Food Security Monitoring System, Kathmandu: UNWFP.

© Oxfam International June 2011

This paper was written by Kate Kilpatrick. Oxfam acknowledges the assistance of Anthony Scott Faiia and Oxfam's team in Nepal in its production.

This publication is copyright but the text may be used free of charge for the purposes of advocacy, campaigning, education, and research, provided that the source is acknowledged in full. The copyright holder requests that all such use be registered with them for impact assessment purposes. For copying in any other circumstances, or for re-use in other publications, or for translation or adaptation, permission must be secured and a fee may be charged. E-mail publish@oxfam.org.uk.

For further information on the issues raised in this paper please e-mail advocacy@oxfaminternational.org.

The information in this publication is correct at the time of going to press.

www.oxfam.org

Published by Oxfam GB for Oxfam International under ISBN 978-1-84814-872-7 in June 2011. Oxfam GB, Oxfam House, John Smith Drive, Cowley, Oxford, OX4 2JY, UK.

Oxfam is an international confederation of fifteen organizations working together in 98 countries to find lasting solutions to poverty and injustice:

Oxfam America (www.oxfamamerica.org),
Oxfam Australia (www.oxfam.org.au),
Oxfam-in-Belgium (www.oxfamsol.be),
Oxfam Canada (www.oxfam.ca),
Oxfam France - Agir ici (www.oxfamfrance.org),
Oxfam Germany (www.oxfam.de),
Oxfam GB (www.oxfam.org.uk),
Oxfam Hong Kong (www.oxfam.org.hk),
Intermón Oxfam (www.intermonoxfam.org),
Oxfam Ireland (www.oxfamireland.org),
Oxfam Mexico (www.oxfammexico.org),
Oxfam New Zealand (www.oxfam.org.nz),
Oxfam Novib (www.oxfamnovib.nl),
Oxfam Quebec (www.oxfam.qc.ca),
Oxfam India (www.oxfamindia.org)

The following organizations are currently observer members of Oxfam International, working towards full affiliation:

Oxfam Japan (www.oxfam.jp)
Oxfam Italy (www.oxfamitalia.org)

Please write to any of the agencies for further information, or visit www.oxfam.org.
Email: advocacy@oxfaminternational.org

www.oxfam.org/grow

GRÖW
FOOD. LIFE. PLANET.

 **Oxfam**