

# NEPAL: The Bridge Builders

Nepal is reorganizing its political system to focus more on decentralization. This means that the Right to Food must be negotiated in every community of every district. Examples from a remote area show that this can succeed.



## Wanted – a round table for everyone

The Right to Food is an unstoppable idea: once conceived, it finds its way everywhere – even into the central and mid-west mountainous regions of Nepal. “The constitution guarantees us food sovereignty,” says Rita Gurung, “but the written words have to be put into practice”. The 37-year-old agricultural economist is team leader at “Initiatives for Biodiversity Research and Development” (LI-BIRD), an organization that promotes local initiatives for the sustainable management of renewable natural resources for food and nutrition security. Its goal is to sensitize and empower all stakeholders - citizens in their communities, local authorities and civil society groups - to advance Nepal’s food policy by leveraging the collective strengths of all these actors.

Nepal is in a transitional phase from a centralized to a decentralized administrative structure. This unleashes a lot of potential for local development, but also generates uncertainty among authorities. A quarter of the population lives below the national poverty line, and the situation is even more precarious in remote districts northwest of Kathmandu such as Salyan and Dhading. Livelihoods in these communities are extremely vulnerable being dependent on subsistence agriculture subject to the effects of climate change, with landslides during monsoon, hail storms in autumn, heavy snowfall in winter and severe drought in spring. In cooperation with Welthungerhilfe, LI-BIRD is working at the local level to bring players together: “Many people in local authorities are unaware of available funds and how to manage the budgetary planning process in consultation with local stakeholders”, says Gurung. “Civil servants and local politicians are also poorly educated,” And: “Many groups such as the farmers’ association are barely organized in these areas.” This is precisely where the project comes in.

## When everyone pulls together

Gurung and her team adopted several methods promoted by Welthungerhilfe to assist civil society groups in self-analysis, enhancing their organizational structure, and devising strategic plans. The organization carries out similar orientation workshops for local governments. “Most of the elected politicians are young and motivated,” says Gurung, “they want to make a difference”. By involving both sides, citizens are educated about their rights, and local government representatives are informed about their resources.

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An important lever is the planning process at settlement level: “That is the space in which policy makers and the local community come together”, Gurung says. This stage used to be neglected, and investment decisions were made without consulting the communities about their priorities. „That was easy“, explains Gurung, “but when it comes to food and nutrition security things become more complex.” To improve the food and nutrition situation in the districts the project trained 39 community groups which sat down with local governments. They formulated proposals for irrigation systems, waste management and strengthening the cultivation of local crops. Funds were channelled in a new way: For example, the local government now supports a mothers’ group that advocates against child marriage to reduce health risks and increase economic opportunities for young women. “When we talk about rights, we need to empower communities to become more resilient and make better use of their own resources for their social and economic empowerment“, Gurung says, referring to complementary measures of the project. For example, the project supports households with climate-resilient seeds and advises on sustainable and resilient farming methods. Households receive guidance to improve their nutrition: they learn about traditional resources such as wild plants that can be used to supplement their diet and children are screened to detect malnutrition.

### A systemic strengthening of the food systems

Food and nutrition security has improved in the project regions. Between 2021 and end of 2022, child malnutrition (Global Acute Malnutrition, GAM), for example, fell significantly from 8,89% to 4.42% in Salyan and from 4,13% to 3.9% in Dhading. The state as an institution taking on its responsibilities is becoming more visible in municipalities, for example by setting up information desks in administrative offices. Local authorities, community groups and organizations from the civil society initiated a dialogue on how the regions can develop. Everyone involved has found that they can achieve more by working together.

### Lessons learned

- **The entire community, in particular the most vulnerable**, must be included in the sensitization on their Right to Food. Sustainable success can only be achieved through a process that leaves no one behind.
- **It is effective to work with existing groups.** Where there are none, it makes sense to help set them up. Representation of different ethnic groups and different geographical areas is key.
- It takes time for civil society organizations to build relationships with communities and local authorities. **“We need to be flexible enough to modify our activities so that they listen to us,”** explains Gurung.



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**Rita Gurung,  
Team Leader at LI-BIRD Nepal:**

The project worked on strengthening the network and promoting collaboration, communication and coordination among key stakeholders where the local community and local government are at the center and become the key actors of change. In addition, the program is strengthening the local community and their organizations so that they can participate in the planning process.

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