

## **Buffer Zone Development – Makalu-Barun National Park** **Nepal, 2003 - 2010**

### **Background**

The area of the Makalu-Barun National Park is part of the Mount Everest ecosystem in the Northeast of Nepal bordering Tibet. The project area comprises of two administrative entities which form a valley system along two rivers and hosts roughly 10,000 people scattered in more than 30 villages. A five days walk from the nearest road head and a two days walk from the nearest airstrip are necessary to reach the area. It is a fragile mountain region with poor infrastructure and social services, limited income opportunities and market access, and high pressures on the natural resource base. The villages are located between an elevation of 750 and 2400 metres, a typical Nepali hill region with extremely steep slopes. The inhabitants are mainly dependent on subsistence farming which yields relatively low economic benefits. Many families supplement their needs from the forests in the form of timber, fuel wood, animal fodder, medicinal plants, and fruits. Subsistence farming does not produce sufficient food for the entire year; seasonal migration for wage-earning jobs and additional income through handicraft-based activities are a common feature.

### **Approach**

The multi-dimensional challenge the Austrian NGO *Eco Himal* faced in the area had to be tackled in an integrated way, including the sectors infrastructure, agriculture, income-generation, education & health, and natural resource management. As core aspect of the strategic approach so-called “Community Development Committees” (CDCs) have been formed in each village, both for women and men individually. These groups meet on a regular basis to discuss community issues, set priorities for future activities, and maintain a savings & loan system as well as a voluntary labour program. All activities are channelled and implemented through these groups.

### **Mid-term results**

The concept of CDCs has been judged as a desirable structure by the farmers themselves. They consider it as an integral part of village life and as an important vehicle for collective problem solving. Especially women use this “protected” space and appreciate it as an expansion of their public role. The separate women and men groups have initially brought some suspicion among each other. However, possible conflict or misunderstandings have been prevented through frequent informal interactions on household and community basis.

The support of rural infrastructure (suspension bridges, trails, schools, irrigation systems) through the project is valued very high and is from principle undisputed by the farmers as it represents their articulated priority needs. The focus on infrastructure reducing women’s workloads (e.g. drinking water systems, traditional water mills for grinding) is appreciated by men in the same way.

The agricultural program aims at supporting the farmers to gradually transform and to diversify their on-farm activities. Improved seed varieties both for cereal crops and vegetables resulted in 20-30% higher yields. The introduction of new vegetable varieties expanded the number of products from 2-3 up to 5-7 in individual kitchen gardens. Improved cropping patterns like mixed and inter-cropping, measures for soil improvement, plantations of fodder and forage plants on terrace fringes, and reforestation for landslide prevention add to incremental changes. The impact through the plantation of around 8000 citrus and temperate fruit trees and approx. 200.000 cardamom saplings is too early to be judged at present.

The project supports the extension of government programs into the area (child classes, out-of-school education, literacy classes, veterinary technicians, out-reach health clinics) and supports government institutions (health posts and schools) in the area. These initiatives are valued highly by the farmers; however, the actual impact and attribution through the project is difficult to judge as the quality of services mainly depends on the government program itself and/or substantial changes can only be seen over a longer period of time.