

No Mountain Too High

Village development in Nepal



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This book is dedicated to all the ‘can do’
villagers in the Tawal area and other villages
in Nepal.

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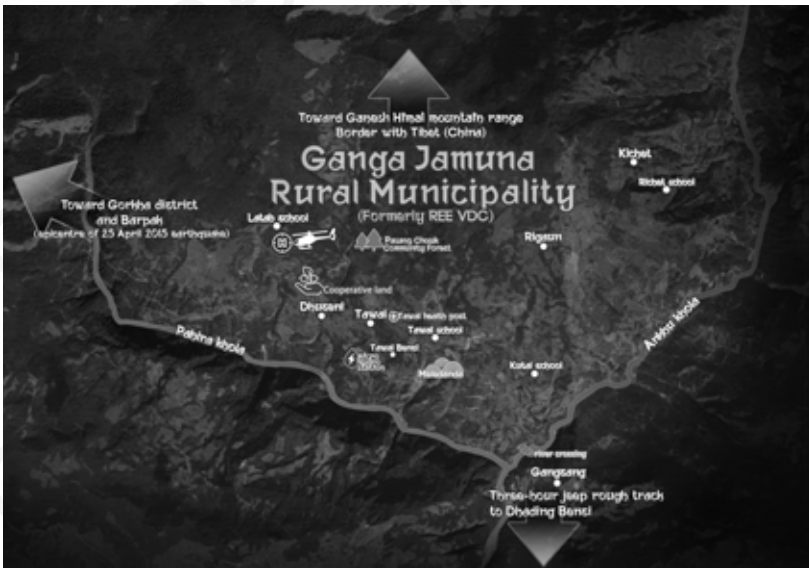
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Locating Tawal within Nepal



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Tawal area



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Foreword

On my retirement, I returned to my home country of Nepal. I had spent 36 years with UNICEF, working in various developing countries in Africa, Central Asia, South Asia and East Asia. The work included planning, program and policy development, and implementation in sectors such as water supply, health, education, nutrition and child protection. In early 2018, my wife Binu and I met Rod and Deborah Setterlund through a mutual friend. Rod is President of the Nepal Australia Friendship Association (NAFA) and Deborah its Research and Evaluation Officer.

Rod and Deborah invited us to accompany them on their visit to the Tawal area in April 2018. We had wanted, in retirement, to make some form of contribution to rural development in our home country so jumped at the opportunity. When we first met Rod and Deb in Kathmandu, we were impressed by their humility, their commitment to rural development in Nepal, and their unflinching dedication at an age when many are slowing down. They had been visiting Nepal annually at their own expense for over 10 years.

Binu and I were aware of projects in Nepal that had started well, began to show results, but then lost momentum or ceased operating due to inadequate planning or monitoring. During our visit to Tawal, we witnessed Rod and Deb working in partnership with the local community to identify needs, develop practical solutions, then follow up on their implementation. Following the visit, we were honoured to be asked to take on volunteer positions to provide NAFA with ongoing advice on program development and on the political and social context within which those programs operate.

No Mountain Too High: Tamang Village Development in Nepal describes how the Tamangs, the predominant group in the Tawal area, migrated to Nepal from Tibet many centuries ago, and how local community leaders yearned to bring education to their communities and to improve the villagers' lives as subsistence farmers. It tells of how a connection between one of these leaders and someone from Brisbane, Australia accelerated the process of development begun by the local community. There were many bureaucratic hurdles to overcome along the way, especially following the devastating 2015 earthquakes.

The impact of the April 2015 earthquake on Tawal area villagers and on the rebuilding of infrastructure and livelihoods is vividly recounted in *No Mountain Too High*. Seemingly insurmountable challenges were met to replace schools in four villages as well as a health post and water and agricultural cooperative infrastructure.

I have been pleased to contribute to this inspiring book, providing comments and advice to Rod on its context. Its story of community development is presented meticulously, sharing development frameworks and experience with other similarly dedicated individuals involved in such work either as paid staff or as volunteers.

The book's unique feature lies in its explanation of how Rod and Deb, through their work with NAFA, successfully connected the needs of the Tawal area with prospective donors back in Australia. They report back regularly to donors, and have even linked local women wanting to increase their income through sewing with consumers in Australia happy to purchase their products! This direct involvement in both need assessment and monitoring of project implementation has encouraged ongoing retention of donors, with the maintenance of donor interest in and enthusiasm for NAFA's work in Nepal.

Successful development requires not only leadership and vision but also an organic relationship between the local community and outside donors. This book illustrates beautifully how such a partnership can address locally identified priorities – education, health, electricity and, more recently, agricultural development – and how vital community participation has been in that development process, ensuring local ownership as opposed to donor-led development.

Development work in Nepal and abroad has been my passion. As an admirer of Rod and Deborah’s compassion, drive and love for the Nepalese people over a long period of time, I am honoured to write this foreword. I have read widely on development, but I have never seen a better-written book demonstrating, through a case study of a group of Nepalese villages, how the process of development can be brought to life and maintained, even in the extraordinary times that follow a natural disaster. I am sure you will enjoy the read.

Bijaya Rajbhandari

Introduction

No Mountain Too High is a story with two primary purposes. At its heart, it is a story about an Australian couple's experience of being part of a small, entirely volunteer-run international-aid organisation, the Nepal Australia Friendship Association (NAFA), based in Brisbane, Australia. At the outset, we would like to say that this is not a story about NAFA. That is a great story but a separate one. Rather, this is our personal reflection on how to bring about positive change through community development.

Secondly, and of equal importance, this story is about giving a voice to a group of villagers from an area around Tawal in the hilly region northwest of Kathmandu. These villagers are from the Tamang ethnic group, who migrated south from Tibet at least 300 years ago. In conversations and more recently recorded interviews, they recalled their experiences of development, both the opportunities they created and the struggles they overcame.

This is a story of risk-takers and visionaries who, within a discriminatory social and political context, have always strived for a better life and future for their community. Hunters and gatherers when they first arrived from Tibet, they transitioned to subsistence farming. In 1960, recognising the importance of education to development, villagers volunteered to build a temporary classroom in Tawal; two years later, a grass-roofed, two-room school that went to Grade 3 level was constructed nearby, at Meledanda.

"Aphno gau aphno banaune" (Let us build our village ourselves) was a strong conviction for these Tamang villagers. These original

schools were built without any government assistance. In 1974, a newer school offering classes up to Grade 5 level was built with government funds and local volunteer labour on the site where the school is now located.

Initially, few children attended school and all were male. Girls stayed at home to help with household chores, collecting wood for cooking, bringing water from the nearby river and caring for younger siblings, while their parents worked in the fields. Future community leaders like Chandra Tamang started their schooling in Meledanda before completing Grade 5 at the newer, government school. For some, their parents' 'outside experiences' of living and working in Pokhara, Kathmandu and India seemed to be a catalyst for change, giving them a better appreciation of the potential of education.

After boys completed Grade 5 in Tawal, their parents rented rooms in distant villages so their sons could attend schools that went to Grade 10 level, providing them the opportunity to obtain their School Leaving Certificate. Up to four students shared a room, relying on just enough food from their parents to last for the school week. Chandra says it was a struggle. He and his friends were poor and from a low-status ethnic group, so were treated as outcasts, but they persevered. Most returned to their villages, some becoming important community leaders. Others, like Chandra, found work as trekking porters, taking them well beyond Tawal to far-flung villages. Chandra eventually worked for a trekking agency in Kathmandu and settled there. But Tawal and his Tamang kin remained close to his heart. He remained determined to improve conditions in the area where he grew up.

Back in Tawal, a youth club was formed by local leaders, soon broadening its focus at Chandra's urging to become the Hilly Region Development Club (HRDC). In the late 1990s, an opportunity to

access foreign-sourced development funding arose when Chandra, through his trekking work, met Lloyd Magdalinski, a schoolteacher from Brisbane, Australia. Lloyd was then Vice-President of NAFA. In his broken English, Chandra invited Lloyd to visit Tawal, and in 1998, Lloyd became the first Westerner to do so. Lloyd returned to Brisbane with a water infrastructure funding proposal, which was followed by a submission to NAFA and AusAid Kathmandu to co-fund construction of a health post to service several Tawal area villages.

Deb and I had trekked in Nepal in late 1999 and it made a lasting impression. We started to attend NAFA committee meetings, but at the time, Nepal was in the midst of a 10-year Maoist insurgency that made it too dangerous to visit many rural areas, including Tawal. We were able to visit Tawal in late 2006, and it soon became clear that a community-development framework could successfully guide a partnership between NAFA and the local community.

Over the next nine years, much progress was made. Then, at midday on Saturday 25 April 2015, the world was changed forever for villagers here and in many other parts of Nepal by a 7.8-magnitude earthquake, its epicentre only 25 km west of Tawal, at Barpak in the Gorkha district. In a matter of minutes, 78 lives in the area were lost and all local infrastructure was destroyed, including approximately 1,225 homes, 10 schools, two health posts, a micro-hydro system, and water and agricultural infrastructure. *No Mountain Too High* tells, in the villagers' own words, the experience of that terrible day and its immediate aftermath.

While overseas aid played a part, competent, compassionate Nepalese professionals were critical in helping the community get back on its feet. The story is one of courage, resilience, trust, competency, generosity and persistence. When the Nepalese government failed

to honour a promise to undertake geotechnical assessments of all earthquake-affected areas, Dr Dhital, a geotechnical engineer from Kathmandu's Tribhuvan University, responded to a desperate request from the community to visit the area and undertake a rapid assessment for landslide risk. Sabin Shrestha worked tirelessly to prepare site and classroom-design plans for approval by the Nepal Government's Department of Education. Sadit Maharjan left his Kathmandu home to come to the area and oversee the first phase of the daunting program to rebuild four village schools.

Recovery from natural disaster, however, involves more than rebuilding community infrastructure. The local Pasang Chowk Agricultural Cooperative had lost their physical infrastructure in the earthquake. This book tells the yet-to-be completed story of how NAFA and the local community partnered with a compassionate, Brisbane-based philanthropist to re-establish and expand the Agricultural Cooperative. A market-system focussed practice framework was applied, with the intention of providing local villagers a sustainable pathway out of poverty.

This story ends with an analysis of those factors that contribute to positive change in applying community and market-system development approaches. It also identifies the challenges that remain. If you are a curious traveller, a community development practitioner, or have an interest in Nepal, remote village life, or the experiences of communities recovering from disaster, we think you will find *No Mountain Too High* valuable and inspiring.”