

CHILDREN – Nepal

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Who is CHILDREN–Nepal? What does CHILDRENepal do?

**The Story of Laxmi, the Woman from the Banks of the River
Seti**

Catches the Spirit of the Mission of CHILDREN-Nepal



The expression best suited to describe life in Nepal is: challenging. In one of the poorest countries in the world, one in four persons is absolutely poor, i.e. must survive on US \$ 1,25 or less per day. Particularly for the poor every single aspect of life is a challenge. Everywhere are obstacles to everything. Needless to say, the burdens of challenge are not equally distributed among the Nepalese people. Life in Nepal was and still is basically exclusionary. Access to political, social, and economical institutions is very limited in this country. Most have simply no access, they are excluded. Exclusionary means that the have-nots are excluded from social benefits that those on the other end of the social strata readily enjoy. The consequences of centuries of exclusion are at the heart of Nepal's political instability today.

As the country is preoccupied with the seemingly never-ending political transition, not much energy is left to address pressing social issues, leaving

many poor children, the weakest members of society, excluded from adequate nutrition, basic health care, and education. Forty percent of them live below the poverty line, 47 percent are stunted, 15% are malnourished, 36 percent are underweight or are otherwise deprived.

This is the scenario into which CHILDREN-Nepal steps in. Their mission is to provide social inclusion for children who have been left excluded. For most of them the future only holds a life of neglect, hunger, abuse, victim of human trafficking and other horrors that humans are able to inflict on each others for any kind of gain. CHILDREN-Nepal's aim is to rescue those excluded children who are in danger of falling between the cracks that social exclusion has left wide open for them. The stories of cases where CHILDREN-Nepal has rescued destitute children from falling off the cliffs and where they have lifted those already fallen into miserable, hopeless lives fills books.

The Story of Laxmi, the Women from the Banks of the River Seti, catches the Spirit of CHILDREN-Nepal's Mission

Laxmi must be about 35 years old. She makes her home in an undulating slum on the banks of the river Seti in the Kaski district of Pokhara, Nepal's second largest city. Visiting Laxmi's neighborhood, the world famous story of life in one of the slums in Bombay, Shantaram by G.D. Roberts, immediately comes to mind. Laxmi's home is a three by three meter ramshackle dwelling constructed from gathered building materials, sheets of plastic wrap, metal sheets, washed-up timber, strings, ropes and other useful scrap found in and along the nearby river. There is hardly enough room for five people sleeping standing up. It is hard to imagine how this rickety structure can hold up against hours of daily heavy monsoon downpours. At the end of each month her landlord the "owner" of the river business comes to collect the monthly rent of Rupees 1.000 (€ 10)



Laxmi's Home Outside



Laxmi's Home Inside

Laxmi has four children, aged 3, 9, 12 and 14. One evening three years ago, when Laxmi was four months pregnant with her fourth child, her husband did not return home from work. He has not been heard of ever since. He simply disappeared from the face of the earth, leaving it to Laxmi to bring up their four children in probably the poorest neighborhood of Pokhara. It takes Laxmi most of the 24 hour day to earn enough money just to keep her family alive. Every morning she gets up at 5:00 o'clock and leaves her shack looking for any opportunity to earn some money for her flock. Laxmi has chosen the location of her homestead carefully, based on economic considerations. The Seti river basin in the Kaski district of Pokhara is a mine of a variety of construction materials: different varieties and qualities of sand, stones of different sizes and quality, washed-up timber of any size, and the occasional other useful valuable find. The value chain of mining construction materials from the river basin extends from scooping up sand from the river bed, digging, shoveling, grading, bagging, carrying to final evacuation: a very well organized, structured business, strictly controlled by organized business interest along the river. This river bed industry would make an excellent subject of a thorough business administration thesis.

Laxmi, a rather small and frail person, takes any job she can physically handle. Along the grueling value chain she has established herself in the grading section, i. e. sieving sand. For a truck load of sieved sand which take her 4-5 days to complete, she is paid Rupees 400-600 (€ 4 to € 6). She sometimes follows the river's output being shipped to designated construction sites where she looks for the occasional unskilled construction job. At the walk-up "restaurants" along the river bank she does the dishes as well as the occasional clean up job. Laxmi also functions as an entrepreneur. She operates an illegal Raksi distillery. Raksi is an exhilarating alcoholic

drink made from millet. Three times a month Laxmi fires up her distillery to produce Raksi to fill orders from the restaurants along the river and for sale in thrown-away beer bottles to her fallow mine workers. The required materials cost her € 12 per batch. One batch clears her around € 10) Obviously, Laxmi is a rather shrewd economist, managing her scarce resources for maximum return, the survival of her family of five. She passes the toughest practical business school tests one can think of. Her forte: finding applications for her talents and managing risks.



Laxmi's Office



Laxmi's Chain Gang Colleague



Laxmi's Distillery

The river Seti made headlines in May 2012. A landslide somewhere high in the Annapurna Mountain Range caused flash floods wiping out an entire river mining business 20 km upstream from Pokhara. Without any warning between 60 and 70 people (nobody knows the exact number) perished in the floods while digging and shoveling in the river bed. The Seti River business does not take prisoners and there is no insurance against the river's occasional freak behavior. Due to this tragedy the number of Nepal's orphans has just increased. Laxmi repeatedly says that she is very much afraid of the river but has no other place to go.

CHILDREN-Nepal Makes Laxmi's Flock Included

This dire river slum is one of the catchment areas for CHILDREN-Nepal. Fortunately Laxmi got caught in this voluntary safety net. She got hold of the life line thrown to her by CHILDREN Nepal sending a glimmer of hope into her hard, bleak, miserable existence. CHILDREN Nepal arranged for her oldest three children to go to school, covering all expenses, school fees, uniforms, reading and writing materials, the lot. Her youngest child, her three year old son, Laxmi has to take to any job she can find while his siblings are at school. Failing this, her daughter has to take her little brother with her to class.

CHILDREN-Nepal made the Laxmi children included. They took these youngsters under their wings and gave them a chance to get a start in life by sending them to school, the prerequisite for any possibility to climb out of the social depth of the river Seti slum. After school they provide them with a sheltered place where they can do their home work under supervision of and help from of an older CHILDREN-Nepal graduate. Laxmi could obviously not provide them with a space to do their home work in their 3m by 3m home. It is not hard to imagine what the future of these kids from the river slum would have been, had CHILDREN-Nepal not intervened and had stopped their free fall. Most likely they would have had to join the river Seti chain gangs at an early age, working themselves way up the value chain from the lighter to most demanding jobs hauling 60 kg of stones or sand on their back up the steep climb from the lower river basin.



In Tandem at School



Being Included



On the other Side of the River



A CHILDREN Nepal Graduate giving a Hand

No words can capture the full and true merit of what CHILDREN Nepal is doing for those children from the river slum. It is CHILDREN-Nepal that makes the difference for these children between being excluded and being included. Probably no one can appreciate the true value of what CHILDREN-Nepal is doing for the Laxmis of this world better than the real Laxmi, the Woman from the Banks of the River Seti. CHILDREN-Nepal is giving her children something she could never dream of giving them herself. Well done CHILDREN-Nepal! The story of Laxmi is both tragic and uplifting. It is also by the way a rich source of insight into understanding the specific problems that afflict the poor and into trying to identify the most effective ways to intervene. Having come across this episode of real life in one of the world's poorest countries, one can but take a very deep breath and be grateful to CHILDREN-Nepal for being there for the many Laxmis in Nepal. We should, however, not leave it at taking a deep breath, but should take a moment and think of how we can help support and strengthen CHILDREN-Nepal which for many desperately poor is the call of last resort.

Fulbari Community Resource Centre

Having established itself over more than a decade as an effective, socially deeply entrenched multifunction NGO with a clear mission, CHILDREN-Nepal now aims at taking its mission to a higher level, serving Nepal's battered society better still. To that end CHILDREN-Nepal plans to establish the Fulbari Community Resource Centre. The Centre will be located 20 km outside Pokhara. It will become a base from where CHILDREN-Nepal will seek to address the roots of the many evils afflicting Nepal's excluded children. Through education, coaching, enlightening, the Centre will seek to reduce the vulnerability of the excluded, improve their resilience and promote for them access to better quality services. The aim of the Fulbari Centre is to emulate what A. V. Banerjee and E. Duflo conclude in their book *Poor Economics*: "It is not easy to escape from poverty, but a sense of possibility and a bit of well-targeted help (a piece of information, a little nudge) can sometimes have surprisingly large effects." That is what the Fulbari Centre will try to deliver.

Suppression, civil war, social injustice and widespread exclusion have planted the seeds of pervasive violence in Nepal's society. Children and women are the first targets of violence at home, at school, in the streets, everywhere. Laxmi for instance has been beaten heavily and repeatedly by her violent husband. The price tag for the Fulbari Centre is in the order of € 750.000,- Twenty percent of that have already been mobilized and have been used to acquire the site for the Centre. With CHILDREN-Nepal's outstanding track record, there is little doubt that they will do it - not least because of our joint generosity.

The Laxmi Story Update

Early June of this year Laxmi's home, the ramshackle dwelling on the river bank, was destroyed by strong winds and heavy rain. The early signs of the approaching monsoon. Laxmi quickly had to find a new roof over the heads of her four children. The stress had worked Laxmi down. She had been diagnosed with a severe case of ulcers and utter fatigue throwing her off her already grueling jobs. The responsibility of providing for their existence has now fallen on the shoulders of her three "older" children who take her mother's place in the river mine, grading and hauling sand for € 6,- a truck load any time when not at school. The load for the nine year old girl is 30kg, half the adult load. With the help of CHILDREN-Nepal Laxmi has found a new place to stay close by however at double the rent. Laxmi has to get out her A-game to meet this still tougher challenge. There are certainly no "low hanging" fruit around for Laxmi to pick. **The Laxmi Story to be continued.**



Laxmi's Home, destroyed by a Monsoon Downpour



The Breadwinner



8 Years old--carrying 30 kg in a leaky Basket



A new more efficient Tool

The latest Chapter of the Laxmi Story unfolded in mid August

A freak unknown event caused a blockage of the narrow gorge of the Seti river just at the fringes of the Kaski district a few hundred meters from where hundreds of slum dwellers make their living from digging up the rivers treasures. The blockage caused the river to rise dangerously fast. Laxmi who has lived close to the river for some time has developed a special sense for the river's unpredictable behavior noticing even unconsciously any change in the river's noise pattern. The gushing river, approaching fast, awoke her just in time to gather her sleeping children before the river flooded her home. All the river left them was their lives and the wet cloth on their skin. Their meager belongings including their school uniforms, books and pencils, the

lot, were taken by the unforgivable river. CHILDREN-Nepal alerted by the new Laxmi tragedy rushed in emergency supplies of food and dry clothing and needless to say new school uniforms, books and pencils. The picture shows a severely tested Laxmi with all she has left: her four children.

The Laxmi Story to be continued.



The Washout



Figure 1 The Laxmi Family

