

NETWORK MEMBER: NEPAL NATIONAL DALIT SOCIAL WELFARE ORGANIZATION



Combating Centuries of Caste Discrimination - One Village at a Time

NNDSWO is committed to the elimination of caste-based discrimination and centuries of “untouchability”. It advocates for the rights and interest of Dalits, builds their capacity and confidence so they can claim and exercise their own rights. It promotes better access to quality education and sustainable livelihoods, and raises awareness on healthy living.

Founded 1982

www.nndsw.org.np



Girls from Nepalese Dalit families receive training on their rights by a NNDSWO staff member.

According to historians, the caste system was codified in Nepal some 700 years ago by King Jayasthiti Malla. Long enough for a rigid, discriminatory value system to pervade almost all aspects of Nepali society. As they do elsewhere in South Asia, Nepalis on the receiving end of discrimination have adopted the term Dalit – or ‘the oppressed’.

In terms of income, life expectancy, literacy, landholdings and a host of development indicators, Dalits in Nepal come at the bottom of the pile. Despite legal and constitutional protections, Dalit children are often humiliated into leaving schools, adults in rural districts continue to face bonded labor or near-slavery practices such as *Balighare*, while Dalit women are the most vulnerable group in a very poor country – subject to domestic

violence, trafficking, child marriage, and a dowry system that perpetuates their low status.

It is estimated that up to one-fifth of Nepal’s population are Dalits or members of similarly vulnerable indigenous tribal groups. The Nepal National Dalit Social Welfare Organization (NNDSWO) was founded in 1982 to campaign for all their rights.

NNDSWO works on access to education, especially providing scholarships, literacy classes and vocational training opportunities for Dalits, and also undertakes livelihood and economic development projects that range from skills development to savings and credit schemes. The area where it employs legal empowerment methods is in its advocacy campaigns – especially those designed to wrest back budgets allocations that are supposed

to be targeted at Dalit communities.

Nepal allocates development funding to two of its most local levels of government – District Development Committees (DDCs) and Village Development Committees (VDCs). Out of the development budget these committees are required to allocate 35 per cent of a ‘targeted’ programme for women (10 per cent), children (10 per cent) and the remaining 15 per cent for Dalits, indigenous peoples, elderly people, people with disabilities and other vulnerable communities.

In reality most of the development funding is spent at the behest of Nepal’s major and minor political parties. When questioned local officials tend to reply that Dalits and others can walk on the roads or attend the schools supported by the development funds.

NNDSWO believes that around US\$1,500-\$2,000 of development funding is being misused in each of Nepal’s nearly 4,000 VDCs – amounts that could have a big impact on families that often live on less than US\$100-a-month. The NGO’s legal empowerment project targets 2,000 of the most impoverished households in eight of Nepal’s districts. Families from three ethnic groups, the Majhi, Bote and Kumal are part of the project, as well as Dalits from Nepal’s Terai, or lowlands, and the country’s mountains.

The 2,000 families are divided into 80 groups, each with a ‘social mobilizer’, or a community member trained as a legal and advocacy advisor to the group. “They organize each member into a group who meet for at least two hours for two days every week,” says Hira Vishawakarma, an activist and researcher for NNDSWO.

“They discuss their problems and prioritize the one which is affecting them the most. They prioritize their issues based on immediate needs, and work out a social plan of action to resolve the issue. They first see what they can do themselves and if they cannot find a solution themselves, they look for a way to resolve it externally.”

Key to the process has been teaching the Dalits not only what their community should be entitled to in terms of development funds, but also educating them about the processes of local government through which they are allocated. The ‘social mobilizers’ organized a public interaction programme in which they invited representatives of the political parties, other formal and informal committees and VDC secretaries. They present very systematically the problems that Dalit and tribal communities face. They not only present problems, but describe what they have done in the groups to make their lives better and list the achievements they have made for themselves. “The idea is to ensure the political parties and VDC secretaries understand that the community has already done something on their own, and are capable of doing more and are very committed people,” says Hira.

The development funds targeted for marginal groups are meant to be spent on capacity and skills development for income generation projects, or to start a fund that can invest in new small business opportunities run by Dalits. The Dalit groups have requested funding for things like toilet construction for their households and commitments to the Open Defecation Free (ODF) movement, seed money support for income generating activities to Dalit women, rehabilitation shelters for GBV survivors



Dalit Civil Society leaders participating in a peace rally organized on the occasion of caste based discrimination free declaration day in Kathmandu.

and educational materials for children from Dalit communities.

In addition to the informal meetings with local decision-makers, the social mobilizers supported each group to attend formal village meetings where decisions about future budget allocations are made. All 80 groups have gone through formal processes of tabling demands – the vast majority have received degrees of support from the village meetings. In places where they faced opposition, the mobilizers have brought the entire group membership to VDC meetings and used local activism – in the form of non-violent sit-ins in front of the committees. An additional method to put pressure on local officials was using the support

of the Nepalese national government – in the form of a letter outlining officials’ duties under the law.

In the first year of the project the Dalit groups got approval for around 40 per cent of their budget demands. More importantly, after engaging with decision-makers and learning about their entitlements, the Dalit groups have grown in confidence: “They know that they are no longer a weak group and they can do something on their own,” says Hira.

“And the perceptions of the local political and social leaders have changed. They have seen that people living in such extreme poverty can not only do something on their own, they can and will make demands from the local authorities.”

Key Lessons

- 1 It is crucial that the community realize that support for them is available and that they have every right to benefit from resources that have been allocated for them.
- 2 It is important to help community members understand how local government processes operate, and by which methods they can gain access to them.
- 3 Decision makers have to be made to understand the vulnerability of the groups in question.
- 4 Don’t attack or ridicule those with decision-making powers over local funds - rather they need to be made realize it is their responsibility to raise the living conditions of the poor and marginalized people in their area.
- 5 You can best provide a voice for the most marginalized groups through community organization - NNDSWO does this by engaging community members in groups.
- 6 We have a saying in Nepali “if you want to hunt fox, you need to prepare as if you would hunt a tiger”. If you want to get funding support from local bodies, then both formal and informal methods need to be adopted.
- 7 The community groups need to show that they have their own strengths - that they were not simply vulnerable and poor people, but people with capabilities and worth who have already achieved things on their own. People who will benefit from further support - and have the capacity to multiply the benefit.