

From Inception to Impact: The Growth History of MDI Nepal

Manahari Development Institute – Nepal (MDI Nepal) was born out of a challenging time in Makawanpur. In the early 2000s, we were part of SAPPROS Nepal, an NGO working in the region. However, the project we were involved in came to an end, leaving many of us jobless. Some of our colleagues moved on to other jobs or returned home, but a few of us remained, determined to continue our work in the area despite having no immediate employment prospects.

The northwestern sector of Makawanpur, where we had previously worked, was one of the most hazard-prone areas, home to indigenous communities like the Chepang and Tamang, who lived in extreme poverty. These communities practiced slash-and-burn agriculture (Khoriya farming) on steep, remote hillsides. This method provided only a few months of food security each year, contributing to high food insecurity, low female literacy, limited access to social services, and frequent natural disasters.

On the night of July 18, 2001, a devastating flood wreaked havoc in the region, causing significant loss of life and property. In response, the government and various social organizations initiated recovery efforts. We, too, set up a small informal office in Manahari and began supporting the affected families with whatever resources we could muster. With contributions from board members and well-wishers, we provided basic necessities like utensils, clothes, and food. This marked our first humanitarian mission.

Nine of us, including four women, decided to formalize our efforts. We drafted the MDI Bidhan (bylaw) and officially registered MDI Nepal with the district administration office of Makawanpur on September 19, 2001. We established a small office in Manahari, funding it with personal contributions. Despite our limited resources, we were committed to helping the community in the long term, even as a new and small organization competing with larger, more influential organizations.

Our perseverance paid off when Mr. Sharad Neupane from the Royal Danish Embassy (Danida) visited our office. While traveling to inspect some Danida project sites in eastern Nepal, he made a stop at our Project Office in Manahari, located 30 kilometers west of Hetaunda on the east-west highway. During his visit, we provided him with a comprehensive overview of the current disaster situation in the area and requested support for rehabilitation and recovery efforts. Mr. Neupane showed a keen interest in supporting sustainable initiatives to enhance the lives of those affected by natural disasters. We submitted a proposal outlining our vision, and to our delight, Danida approved funding of Rs. 20.3 million for a three-year project from 2002 to 2005, named the Participatory Tribal Development Programme (PTDP). The project focused on improving the livelihoods of affected families through various initiatives, including infrastructure development, high-value cash crops, agroforestry, and market center establishment.

The PTDP's success underscored the need to address the destructive practice of shifting cultivation prevalent in the area. Reflecting on our initial efforts, we realized the necessity of a more sustainable and inclusive approach. We decided to explore agroforestry as a potential solution. Analyzing 15 years of rainfall data from nearby meteorological stations, we concluded that the area's modest rainfall could support agroforestry practices, even during the dry season.

Securing funding for this new venture was challenging. As a small organization with limited influence, we struggled to gain traction. However, a fortunate opportunity arose during a meeting organized by the UNDP GEF Small Grants Programme in Pokhara. Our proposal to rehabilitate degraded lands through agroforestry captured the attention of Mr. Gopal Raj Sherchan, the National Coordinator of GEF SGP Nepal. Encouraged by his positive feedback, we refined and submitted our proposal, targeting the most vulnerable Chepang and Tamang families. A few months later, we received approval for a grant of US \$49,000 to pilot the project in four VDCs in northwest Makawanpur, allowing us to plant approximately one million plants, including bananas, pineapples, citrus, and other crops.

However, the area faced another crisis in 2008/09 with a severe drought, exacerbating food insecurity. In response to this crisis, we reached out to the World Food Programme (WFP) for assistance. We contacted Mr. Prem Bahadur Singh, a senior officer at the WFP Central Office in Kathmandu. Initially, Mr. Singh informed us that Makawanpur was not designated as a targeted district under the Food for Work (FFW) program. However, recognizing the urgency and gravity of the situation, he was able to reallocate some surplus and unused food items from other districts. He encouraged us to initiate an FFW program to address the famine.

As it was June, a critical period for planting, we swiftly developed a program for the months of June through August. The WFP provided 200 metric tons of rice to support the three-month FFW initiative. This program successfully mobilized around 5,000 families to plant 9.2 million agroforestry species, including banana, pineapple, broomgrass, and other crops. The intervention not only provided immediate relief by offering 4 kg of rice for 8 hours of work per day but also established long-term livelihood opportunities for the communities involved.

Our dedicated efforts in environmental conservation and social development have earned us prestigious recognition from national and international organizations. The Government of Nepal awarded us the Environment Conservation Award (Rs. 50,000), while the Asia Pacific Forum for Environment and Development (APFED) and IGES in Japan honored us with the Ryutaro Hashimoto APFED Gold Prize Award (\$20,000). We also received the UNEP Sasakawa Prize (\$100,000) from the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP), the Adaptation at Scale Prize (€10,000) from UKAID/DFID, and the Jagdish Chandra Ghimire Memorial Social Award (Rs. 25,000) from the National NGO Federation of Nepal. These accolades underscore our impactful work in promoting sustainability and social well-being.

Today, the agroforestry project, along with the infrastructure works like road access and irrigation systems built during that time, has become a cornerstone of the local economy. It provides cash income and helps conserve soil. The success in Makawanpur has inspired similar projects in 15 other districts ((Udaypur, Khotang, Tanahun, Salyan, Pyuthan, Jajarkot, Dailekh, Rukum, Rolpa, Udaypur, Jumla, Kalikot, Chitwan, Sindhupalchowk and Kavre), supported by WFP and various other organizations especially the Danida, FAO, GIZ, Poverty Alleviation Fund (PAF), AEPC and respective local governments.

MDI Nepal's journey from inception to impact is a testament to the power of resilience and community-driven development. Through sustainable farming and agroforestry, we transformed barren Khoriya lands into productive assets, providing food security and income for countless families. The journey

continues, with ongoing support from local governments and international donors, as we strive to uplift the dignity of the people of Makawanpur and beyond.

We extend our heartfelt gratitude to all who have supported us along the way, including Mr. Sharad Neupane, Mr. Gopal Raj Sherchan, and Mr. Prem Bahadur Singh, who provided invaluable assistance during a critical period. Your generous support has been instrumental in our journey toward poverty alleviation and environmental conservation. We hope to continue this work with your ongoing support, fighting hunger, deprivation, and destitution in our communities.

Thank you and regards from within the heart.

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