

Home gardens are within reach of marginalised people

In Nepal, development projects often focus on policy issues such as rights-based approaches, with less emphasis on livelihoods. The impact on the poor of such an approach is often not immediately visible. This article describes how an NGO helps rural households to start home gardening, independent from local landlords or far-away markets.

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Home gardening is a livelihood option for vulnerable groups. On plots of land around houses people can grow a wide variety of vegetables, fruits, fodder and medicinal plants, as well as livestock, poultry, small fish ponds and bees. People may even experiment with rare local species for domestication, and exchange seeds and planting material with each other. The size varies from 20 to 500 square metres. Local livestock is the major source of organic fertilizer, and family labour is sufficient for the home garden production system. Nearly three-quarters of the poor and excluded households have access to plots for home gardening, where they can produce some food independent from landlords or local markets. A small amount of labour, complemented with technical support, changed one woman's status from being a receiver to being a provider: "Before, these hands were put forward to receive vegetables from others, but now, they are put forward to offer some."

Targeting excluded groups

Once people see the opportunity, they are keen to develop a good home garden. In 2002, Nepali NGOs (such as Local Initiatives for Biodiversity Research and Development, LI-BIRD) along with Bioersivity International, the Nepali Government and the Swiss Development Corporation, started researching the role of home gardens in rural livelihoods. They studied which groups are excluded and how. For example, groups include women, non-Sanskrit speakers, non-Hindus and low castes or untouchables (*dalits*). They have poor access to production, or have a low level of self-confidence. Women, for example, cannot leave the house because of caring tasks. This makes them reluctant to participate in development initiatives. To make things more complex, not all *dalits* in a community are economically poor, but they are not seen as valuable members of the local community and they cannot benefit from development efforts.

Earning our own income

Sumitra Nepali is a widow in the village of Hardineta, Gulmi. She has a daughter and two sons. Before the project, Sumitra earned an irregular income by working on others' land, and her sons also sent her a little money. The family owns a small piece of land around their homestead (250 m²) which was left bare for most of the periods of a year. For Sumitra, the evening meal had become occasional. She had been unable to feed pigs which were a source of income for her. After the project, Sumitra has become a nursery woman in her village. Many farmers now visit her to learn about raising vegetables in a nursery. She works with many crops, including: areca nut, guava, cauliflower, tomato, radish, carrot, winter beans, garlic and fennel. She has earned Rs. 6000 (about US \$ 80) in a season from the nursery and selling vegetables. She has started keeping pigs again, feeding them with kitchen wastes.



Women's livelihoods in Nepal have improved greatly through intensive home gardening.

Three years of action research contributed to forming a programme designed to overcome such difficulties. In the initial phase it was difficult to involve people who usually do not participate in development efforts. The project therefore developed a "door to door" approach, in which project group members visit households and their home gardens and plant different vegetable species. Soon people could themselves see how useful such farming can be, helping them to decide to participate in the home garden project.

Women-only and mixed groups

The programme formed groups around home gardening. Some were women-only groups. The home garden is considered an extension of her domain, and is where she needs to be to manage mixing travel with child care, food processing and food preparation. In some households men migrate for long periods. As it is mostly men who sell the major cash crops, they control the resulting income. Women often control their own income from the home garden.

Mixed farmers' groups stimulate learning from each other, and sharing knowledge and experiences. Groups' programmes and norms are designed to assist the process of social inclusion: meetings are organised at appropriate times, and for poor group members they provide subsidised home garden planting materials. Establishment of a pro-poor fund enhances their confidence that they could also benefit from income generation activities. Elite groups in the community serve as knowledge and seed banks for other members in the community. The coaching they provide is strategically important. Without such coaching, higher castes discriminate against low-caste groups. Thus, at community level, home gardens become an important unit for enhancing social relations.

Home gardening alone is not enough

Vulnerable groups usually lack enough land to grow staple crops, but many of them have access to small plots which they can cultivate intensively. Home gardening can be a means for reaching excluded people, but it cannot address all their problems. More structural means such as rights-based approaches are necessary to complement more direct interventions such as support to home gardening.

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