

# Promoting gender and social inclusion in brick factories in Nepal



Around 300,000 male and female workers in Nepal are estimated to be engaged in brick production in 2019 (as per the national brick stakeholders' meeting in May 2019), with most of the workforce comprising migrants from marginalized and highly vulnerable social groups. As the brick sector grows, so does its responsibility towards improving its workers' living and working conditions. But this informal sector is largely operated with unorganized and unskilled male and female workers who are not supported by any form of social protection.

The social component of ICIMOD's Brick Initiative accordingly uses a strategic approach linking brick productivity gains and efficiency with improving working and living conditions of both women and men working in brick factories. The Initiative conducted a rapid gender need assessment and political economy analysis in five districts – Morang, Rautahat, Dhading, Rupandehi, and Kanchanpur – across five provinces in Nepal in consultation with the Federation of Nepal Brick Industries (FNBI).

Findings from these studies have guided an action research design in three priority areas: i) health insurance through Shikhar Insurance Co. Ltd., ii) workplace safety through awareness materials, and iii) education for workers' children through OLE Nepal.

The social component expects to generate evidence through action research that will convince brick factory owners that improving working and living conditions will bring not only socioeconomic benefits but also higher productivity gains in the long run with a steady stream of skilled, semiskilled, and unskilled workers.

ICIMOD's Brick Initiative achieved a vital breakthrough in 2018 when it managed to create awareness among brick entrepreneurs that the social and gender aspects of production are as important as the adoption of efficient technologies. This has enabled collaborative gender and social action research interventions at factories to improve working and living conditions.

## Outcomes and impacts of ongoing interventions

The socioeconomic outcomes resulting from the action research are expected to help rebrand the sector and present the brick sector to policy makers as socially responsible and lucrative for all involved.

The following action research interventions support brick workers help themselves through focused efforts in the three priority areas:

- **ICT-based education pilot:** Access to formal learning facilities for workers' children is expected to reduce the burden shouldered by women in both child care and income generation. ICT-enabled facilities have been established through a public-private partnership in Shree Kalika Primary School, Dhading district, where the majority of students enrolled are brick workers' children. The ICT-enabled classes provide creative, engaging, and interactive learning experiences to the children. The action research will assess whether these children can complete their curriculum during the brick season so that their education is not interrupted.
- **Financial literacy:** The Brick Initiative has trained about 140 workers (mostly women) and their spouses in financial literacy to bring about behavioural change and improve productivity earnings. This intervention is expected to help these vulnerable families manage limited financial resources and adapt to uncertainty. This ultimately strengthens women's economic independence and social empowerment.
- **Health insurance:** Insurance in the brick sector involves medical and accident coverage for workers. It also involves insurance for bricks damaged by unseasonal rainfall, which protects both workers and owners. Insurance companies were reluctant to insure brick factories given its informal nature. However, following an ICIMOD-facilitated discussion between the two parties, insurance companies have expressed interest in entering this market. The insurance board has also provided positive feedback, while Shikhar Insurance Co. Ltd. has suggested a pilot study in Rupandehi or Biratnagar as a way forward.

- **Social code of conduct (CoC):** A social CoC is central to the improvement of working conditions as it can contribute to (1) minimizing the disparity between factories with advanced vs basic practices; (2) setting up a mechanism for common ownership; and (3) legitimizing brick factories for engagement with policy makers. A number of provincial level meetings have been held by the Federation of Nepal Brick Industries (FNBI) to discuss the formulation of a social CoC. Moreover, a national workshop is being held in Kathmandu from 27 to 30 June 2019 to discuss a draft of a social CoC.

## Way forward for the Brick Initiative

The Brick Initiative has pinpointed gender-focused interventions as a cost-effective option towards more socially responsible brick production in Nepal. It is expected that these learnings will be scaled up as best practices across the Hindu Kush Himalayan region through a common platform – that is, the Federation of South Asia Brick Kiln Association (FABKA). FABKA is already precipitating in-country sector reforms in technical as well as socioeconomic aspects of brick production, and also enabling cross-boundary exchange of knowledge.



## For further information contact

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