

Fifteen Years On: A Visit to ETC's Sunsari Projects *by Linda Farthing*

It's difficult to pinpoint the highlight of my late March trip to the Educate the Children (ETC) project in Nepal's Sunsari district, but perhaps it was the little girl picking up a traditional Nepali drum with delight on her face in the Early Childhood Development Centre that ETC has equipped and trained. Or the woman beaming as she stood in front of her bright red latrine that ETC helped her install. Or the earnest faces of the upper secondary school ETC scholarship students determined to be the first in their families to go to university.



Photos by Linda Farthing



Photo by Mira Rana

There were many of these moments in the two days I spent visiting ETC projects, accompanied by current ETC staff, but most meaningfully for me by Mira Rana, who I worked with in the 1990s at ETC's first project site in Nuwakot and Rusuwaa. Mira and I have a track record of countless hours discussing development approaches, and the pragmatics of how to ensure that programs make a difference in the lives of the poor, particularly women. We have been friends ever since and visited several times— at her home in Kathmandu fifteen years ago when I last visited ETC projects (in the Kathmandu valley), in Ithaca, in Washington DC and on Long Island.

The legacy of that first successful ETC project was very much on display in Sunsari. In coordination with the local NGO Save the Earth which has several staff from the communities where ETC is working, Women's Groups gather regularly, scores of children attend Early Childhood Development centers and improved schools, livestock and gardens are blossoming, and cooperatives are busy funding income generation projects.

Perhaps the biggest takeaway of my trip was the key importance for these very poor people of generating even modest amounts of income. Most of ETC's Sunsari participants come from Dalit castes and impoverished ethnic groups, who together are the most marginalized and frequently landless group of rural farmers. They toil in the fields of landlords – about half of whom don't live locally – for a minimum daily wage. Some, usually young men, seasonally escape across the open border to India where wages are higher.¹

Remittances from what these migrants and millions of others like them send home make up a quarter of Nepal's Gross Domestic Product², one of the highest in the world, and arguably an important reason³ behind the country's declining poverty rate and overall birth rates. While these have both been halved in the past 30 years, progress has slowed in the past 15 years⁴ with stubborn pockets of extreme poverty and discrimination found throughout the country. This is precisely the communities where ETC works.

Migrating for agricultural work as a solution is less available to women, who earn wages about 11 percent lower⁵ than men's. But while we were visiting, a group of Women's group members were earning 600 rupees (about US\$4.40 in late March 2025) per day planting trees through a national government-funded scheme that provides between a month and three months of work to poor communities throughout Nepal. "This is a good wage for us", Manju Mochi of the Samajik Pragati Women's Group told me. The energetic ward chairman, Ghanshyam Chaudhary, beamed with enthusiasm about ETC's work in his area and told us he planned to use the government scheme to beautify all the local roads with flowering trees.



Planting bottle brush trees along the road. Photo by Linda Farthing

¹ <https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/57a08cfce5274a31e0001590/wp218.pdf>

² This is an old figure but was also told to me by several people.

³ <https://blogs.worldbank.org/en/endpovertyinsouthasia/against-all-odds-what-driving-poverty-reduction-nepal>

⁴ <https://nepalitimes.com/here-now/why-nepal-s-poverty-rate-is-stuck>

⁵ <https://www.iids.org.np/images/publications/7d88c042b83460b55b86b429f9081803.pdf>

To stimulate local incomes, the local Women's Groups have formed a cooperative. "This is a savings and credit group," explained acting ETC Nepal director Neela Malla. "Women contribute a small amount of money each month which enables them to make loans with the interest flowing back to the cooperative." This contrasts with the often-criticized model of micro-credit institutions⁶ which can worsen the poor's debt burden, increase the hours women work, and focus on individual solutions to poverty rather than addressing structural issues like landlessness.



Landless people in ETC's project area are so desperate for land that they often plant subsistence plots along the strips between the road and the fields that are government land. Photo by Linda Farthing

As I asked questions of the women's group that I sponsor in memory of my mother, recently-widowed Usha Chaudhary burst into tears. But then she hesitantly explained that despite losing her husband a year ago, she has opened a local teashop and plans to sell the kids from a goat she acquired through ETC to send her daughter Manisha to 10+2 college (the last two years of secondary school). As she tentatively began sharing her story, Manisha stood on the sidelines encouraging her mother to overcome her shyness and speak out.



Usha with friends and neighbors at her newly-opened tea shop. Photo by Linda Farthing

⁶ <https://exhibitions.globalfundforwomen.org/economica/microenterprise/critique-microcredit>

Another member of the same Women's Group, Chandrakala Urau, took up raising pigs with training in livestock management from ETC. The affection she felt for the big sow whose piglets had generated 50,000 rupees (US \$ 365) for her in the past year was obvious. As she stroked her, she declared, "This pig has changed my life!" All told she has raised 13 piglets for sale from the original one she received from ETC. "I have used the money to invest in my children's education, put a bit of savings into the cooperative, and buy bricks for a new wall for my house. I really appreciate how much easier and happier this ETC project has made my life."

The 19 women in "my" women's group are mostly Maithili-speakers from the Mochi caste, traditionally the shoemakers of South Asia⁷ and one of the Dalit castes. A few have scraps of land and the rest are landless. Thanks to ETC, all the WG members' children are enrolled in school with 16 attending the ETC-sponsored Early Childhood Development Center, and all of them have latrines at their homes. Six have goats, and three have pigs.



Chandrakala Urau with her beloved and productive mother pig. Photo by Linda Farthing



With the Samajik Pragati women's group I sponsor and ETC/Save the Earth (local program partner organization) staff. Photographer unknown

⁷ https://joshuaproject.net/people_groups/17639/NP

Our first stop of the day had been to visit a couple who have a tiny plot of land (about a 1/30 of an acre) where they are growing garlic. ETC agricultural staff have taught Surji Urau and her husband Chandra Man Urau how to grow a healthy crop and they proudly told me that they earned NPR 30,000 rupees from each yearly harvest. While this amount only translates into US\$ 220, it represents a significant contribution to their family income. The rest of the year, they grow mustard greens and okra (called ladyfingers in Nepal), for their own consumption and local sale.

Forty-two-year-old Surji is a member of the local Women's group, and even though she is illiterate, she says, "I have learned so much from the training we have received, especially in agriculture. Before we had no income from our land, now thanks to what we have learned, we do." Almost a third of women in Sunsari can neither read or write⁸, most of these from lower castes and marginalized ethnicities.

Surji has been on a tour to see other savings cooperatives and hopes that the newly-formed cooperative in her area will emulate them. "The extra income I get through ETC projects helps to support my children and my very old mother and father-in law," she explains.



Surjiri and Chandra Man in their garlic field. Photo by Linda Farthing

While I am asking Surji questions (English to Nepali to Urau and back again!), another woman pipes up, keen to be interviewed too. Sunita Urau is 37 with two children and is better educated than most of her women's group peers as she has reached the tenth grade. "I am really enjoying all the new friends I have made in my women's group," she says while Surji nods her head in agreement. "We have had several really helpful trainings, and I am now saving through the coop for my children's education." She proudly announces that she has personal savings of NPR 7,900 (US\$58).

When I ask if there is anything else she would like ETC to be doing, she laughs and says, "Don't leave! Please stay longer in our area. There is so much more you could do!" One of the

⁸ <https://censusnepal.cbs.gov.np/results/population?province=1&district=13&municipality=9>

trainers for Women's Groups in Sunsari, Pasaal Khatiwoda, who is sitting cross-legged nearby adds, "When I first started working here, women were so shy, covering their faces with their saris whenever they were asked a question, but now look at them!" He added, "I think the ETC approach to Integrated Community Development is particularly effective for extremely poor and landless people. I have worked with other international development organizations, and they don't manage to foster a sense of ownership in the project like ETC does."

Surji, Chandra Man and Sunita are Uraui or Urauw, a group that numbers only 40,000 people in Nepal yet retains their own language and culture despite significant discrimination. Uraui is one of nine languages spoken in Sunsari and one of some 60 caste/ethnicities in the district⁹ with a population of under a million people, demonstrating the enormous cultural and linguistic complexity that ETC faces. Fortunately, ETC/Save the Earth dynamic staff member Hira Adhikari speaks Uraui fluently.

To better grasp how the savings and credit cooperative works, we visited their rented office where representatives of all 11 of ETC's local women's groups (some 245 women) plan how to develop their coop, extend its loans and make it self-sufficient. "Most of our members borrow money for income generation, and for emergency expenses," coop treasurer Kabita Chaudhary told us. At 12% annual interest, the loan rates are far lower than other local lenders and all the interest paid goes back to the coop. "On our own, we can't get loans," chairwoman Gita Chaudhary explains, "but once we have a coop, we are in a much better position."



Coop treasurer Kabita Chaudhary speaking to us. Photo by Mira Rana

The representatives admitted that it had been difficult to convince women to join the cooperative. "So many had negative experiences with micro-credit programs in the past that they were highly distrustful," explained Kabita. "But once they saw how ETC worked through encouraging us to save a little money ourselves in our women's group monthly savings and providing training, they gradually became more confident. For so many of us, this is not just a coop, it's a home."

⁹ <https://www.recordnepal.com/the-uranw-and-their-karma-festival>; <https://www.recordnepal.com/the-uranw-and-their-karma-festival>

Then we were off to a demonstration farm that is about 1/20 of an acre in size. Tomatoes, chard and okra were all flourishing in the small space. The income from the farm goes to the family who own this sliver of land. “The whole family works on it,” explained farmer Yubaraj Pariyar as he showed me the organic pesticide ETC technicians had taught him how to make. “My mum runs a vegetable shop with what we produce here.” His mother, Saraswotee Pariyar, is a Women’s Group member.

So what happens when a women’s group forms in a village and puts a cap of 20 members and a limited sign-up period. “Many of these women have been in other development projects which ended up wasting their time or put them into debt,” explains former ETC director Mira Rana. “It takes some convincing them that we work differently, but once we get the group going, and it starts to produce results, of course others want to join in. But we have to say no to them at this point because the program follows a process, and they need to start at the beginning of it.”



(L) Yubaraj Urau with bottles of organic pesticide; (R) Saraswotee Pariyar in the vegetable shop. Photos by Linda Farthing

After this action-packed day, we went back to our hotel in Itahari and collapsed, only to begin again early the next day with a trip focused on ETC’s educational programs. Our first stop was an Early Childhood Development Center. Six of the ones ETC works with are government-funded day care and kindergartens. But while the government built the centers, they lacked necessary supplies and adequate teacher training. Thanks to ETC, this center is now bright and cheerful with an enthusiastic teacher, Gita Bista, working with 18 children from 2.5 years to 5 years old four hours a day, five days a week. ETC works in an additional 12 ECDs that are based in local schools.



(L) Gita Bista, ECD teacher, and children; (R) Parents picking children up from ECD center. Photos by Linda Farthing

I had a chance to talk to two parents. Nisha Balkoti told me that her son “has learned a lot. That’s because the teacher is so devoted and treats the children so well.” Sabana Maghi added, “This is the second child I have enrolled in this program. Not only has she learned her letters and numbers, but she doesn’t quarrel so much because she is learning how to get along with other children.” Another reason this ECD is so successful is because the parents are very involved, often helping in the classroom.

Next, we visited a grade 5 classroom headed by Ashok Chaudhary who praised the help that ETC has given in training and school supplies for individual children and their classrooms. “Now all the local children can attend school which was not the case in the past.” He described Save the Earth and ETC’s contribution as “vital” in creating a very low dropout rate at the school which is attended for the most part by the economically poorest students. “The school has become such a success,” he says, “that families who have been scraping together funds to send their children to private schools, are realizing that their children can get a good education here...and for free! No school fees and free supplies gives a real income boost to these families.”



Visiting Bhagawati Basic School. Photographer unknown

The final piece of the Sunsari education program is the scholarship given to ten 17-and-eighteen- year-old students who are doing post-secondary technical training. Seven of them have mothers in Women's Groups, and they shared with me the very high hopes they have for their personal and community futures. Laxmi Bhujel is studying to be a lab technician. "It's quite simple," she says, "I never would have had this chance without ETC. I'm so grateful to you!"

All of this work would not be possible without the considerable dedication of the six ETC staff in Sunsari, backed up by six more in Kathmandu. Spearheaded by the staunch commitment of 65-year-old Puspa Bhattarai, the chairman of Save the Earth who has been doing social work in Sunsari communities for 31 years, the young staff in Sunsari seem to love their work.

"I feel very proud of the work I have done in my own community through ETC/Save the Earth," education program assistant Radha Chaudhary told me. "I really like being out in the communities and working with children in the twelve schools we work in."



Mira (L) sharing ideas with Radha Chaudhary (R), field staff member in the education program. Photo by Linda Farthing

Another local is Bishal Chaudhary who is a 21-year-old in the early stages of a career in agriculture. He is doing an internship with the agricultural team. "The people we work with are very abandoned – by our society and our government, and this project makes them feel that someone cares about them," he explained. "I find it very satisfying to show that we are concerned about their future. And I really enjoy working with the Save the Earth/ETC staff who are both very committed and a lot of fun."

Puspa is also very satisfied with the Save the Earth/ETC partnership. "ETC is one of the older NGOs (non-governmental organizations) working in Nepal and they have a very good reputation," he said. "This is why we sought them out, and I can say that I am very pleased with the results of our collaboration." The other central partnership for the program is the close coordination with the chairpeople of the local Wards where the project works.



Interviewing Puspa Bhattarai, chairman of Save the Earth, ETC's partner organization in Sunsari. Photo by Neela Malla

The next day I returned to Kathmandu, struggling somewhat to absorb everything I had seen, heard and experienced. ETC had clearly matured significantly in the years since my last project visit in 2008, which was wonderful to see. But underlying all of its work was the continuation of a strong commitment to people's capacity to solve their own problems and address their own challenges which has been at the core of ETC's mission since the very beginning.



ETC Sunsari staff members with Mira, Neela and me. Photographer unknown