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# CHANGED LIVES, SAFE HOMES

A Collection of Reconstruction Stories

**EMPLOYMENT**  
FUND investing in nepal's future

 **HELVETAS**  
NEPAL

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Employment Fund – Skills for Reconstruction

HELVETAS Nepal

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# Foreword

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The Employment Fund (EF) was established in 2008 through a bilateral agreement between the Governments of Nepal and Switzerland (Swiss Agency for Development, SDC), with the goal to train unemployed young women and men in technical skills demanded by on the job market. It became a large multi-donor project (2010 to 2015) with additional funding through the World Bank and DFID, devising and testing many innovative approaches in the vocational education sector. These included a system of results-based payment to private training providers, and a range of methods for promoting the engagement of women in skills training. Helvetas Nepal has been managing the Employment Fund Secretariat since its establishment.

Although the Employment Fund was due to terminate in 2015, following the earthquake in April that year it was quickly adapted to focus on training in earthquake-resilient construction skills due to the huge demand of human resource in reconstruction. Under a bilateral agreement between the governments of Nepal and Switzerland, the SDC Employment Fund Skills for Reconstruction (EF-SR) project operated from July 2015 to December 2017 and was extended to a second phase (EF-SR II) from January 2018 to June 2020. Technical assistance was provided by Helvetas Nepal.

In its second phase, the project was implemented in different ten municipalities/rural municipalities of Ramechhap, Okhaldhunga and Khotang and had two major outcomes. The first outcome on was skills-based training to produce construction workers skilled in earthquake-resilient techniques. For this, the project worked through private sector training providers using the results-based payment system with a 50-day practical on-site training course. The second outcome was technical assistance to earthquake-affected homeowners to expedite the Nepal government's reconstruction policy. Under this policy, implemented by the National

Reconstruction Authority (NRA), all homeowners whose houses had been destroyed by the earthquake were eligible for a grant of NPR 300,000, paid in three tranches. As the stories in this booklet show, some people needed considerable assistance to be able to claim this grant.

During phase II of the SDC EF-SR project, technical assistance to the homeowners was largely provided by Construction Resource Persons (CRPs) employed through the project. These were local men and women who had shown exceptional promise during mason training and were groomed to take on further responsibilities. With their good relationships with the earthquake-affected households, the CRPs also played a crucial role in guiding and monitoring the houses constructed during the 50-day on-site mason training. The skilled masons who have been trained represent a very positive and long-lasting contribution to community development that is additional to the safe homes that have been constructed. Essentially, what was a humanitarian project in response to the earthquake was built out of the experiences of a development project – and has ultimately achieved long-lasting development results.

This booklet is a collection of stories about the skilled masons, the earthquake affected homeowners and the CRPs. They were elaborated in consultation with the different municipalities/rural municipalities involved. Where individuals have been quoted, we have translated their words as closely as possible from the original Nepali. Therefore, we have retained the way that they referred to the project as a “Swiss Project” rather than “SDC project”, which is more correct. Their stories are a testament to the determination and effort of all concerned and represent a source of hope and potential inspiration to others.

## **Employment Fund Secretariat**

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# List of Abbreviations

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CRPs	Construction Resource Persons
DFID	Department for International Development
EF	Employment Fund
EF-SR	Employment Fund Skills for Reconstruction
EF-SR II	Employment Fund Skills for Reconstruction extended to a second phase
NPR	Nepalese Rupees
NRA	National Reconstruction Authority
NSTB	National Skill Testing Board
SDC	Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation
SLC	School Leaving Certificate

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# STORIES OF THE HOUSE OWNERS

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# Finally, I am Addressed by My Own Name

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Bilandu village lies in the ethnically diverse rural municipality of Champadevi in Okhaldhunga district. Dev Bahadur Nepali, from a Dalit community, lives in Bilandu with his wife and nine children. One of his daughters, Rita Nepali is physically different from his other children. Rita is shorter than an average 22- year old, being not quite 4 feet (some 1.2 m) tall. Due to this, from an early age, she had to face daily discrimination and harassment from local people as well as from her own family. Due to excessive bullying, she could not even continue her education and dropped out of school after grade five.

Along with all this bullying, Rita had even forgotten her own name, as her family members and people in the community referred to her by names such as *punti*, *bhunti* (nicknames for short people). All her eight siblings started living separately after marriage, but she was left at home. Hence, the responsibility of caring for her elderly parents fell upon Rita's shoulders. As her father was old and sick, unable to go outside to work, Rita and her mother had to search for daily wage labor locally in order to survive. Even though she was able to obtain agricultural and domestic work, Rita always received lower wages than others. When she asked why, her employers gave the reason that she was unable to perform as well as others. Rita felt ashamed. With all the difficulties that she constantly faced in life she blamed her fate. In her darkest days, she even felt that perhaps her birth was the result of past sin.

When the earthquake hit on 25th April 2015, many of the houses and temples of Bilandu were destroyed, including Rita's family home. After a few months, a 50-day mason training was announced in the village. It was organized under the EF-SR, working with the local service provider TRACE. Rita heard about this training and noticed that it was said that priority would be given to women, marginalized people and people with physical disability. This gave her confidence and determination to apply. She was awarded a place on the course and completed it with dedication and enthusiasm - finally receiving the certificate of completion.

After the training, Rita was able to complete the rebuilding of her family house, receiving all three tranches of the government grant. She started to work jointly with other skilled masons and together, they completed a neighbor's house. Gradually, her confidence grew as she worked as a skilled mason to complete other people's houses. She also saw a further way to earn money and started taking contracts for the supply of raw materials (sand and aggregate stone). As this was profitable, she expanded into taking contracts for mud and plaster work in house reconstruction.

Today, Rita's financial condition has changed completely. She is supporting her father with his treatment, making sure all his essential medical needs are met. She is getting paid the same as men for mason work. Furthermore, her siblings now treat her with love and respect. She says, "My perception towards my life has changed, I do not curse my birth anymore. I am earning and feeding my parents and taking care of their other essential needs." She further adds that there is one feeling that gives her immense satisfaction. "I can't express my feeling when people call me Rita instead of *punti* or *bhunti*. My name is beautiful and I feel like a queen after getting it back."

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## From Discrimination to Respect

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Thirty-one-year old Kalpana Badi is a resident of Nagadah, ward 8 of Champadevi rural municipality, Okhaldunga. People in Badi community live a difficult life of poverty and unemployment, their only source of livelihood is hard manual labor. They are generally scorned by others due to their traditional cast occupation. They are involved in making *madal* (a traditional Nepali musical instrument) which takes a long time to prepare but fetches a low price in the market. Kalpana and her husband Hari used to make *madal* to earn enough to feed their family of six, yet they struggled to provide meals twice a day for them.

The 2015 earthquake destroyed Kalpana's family house, compelling them to live in a temporary shed. Then in 2018, the 50-day mason training was announced in their community. Kalpana saw this skills training as a ray of hope and discussed with Hari the idea of enrolling. He also showed interest. Finally, Kalpana and Hari both participated in the mason training and completed the 50-day course with commitment and discipline. During the training, they learned about the process of obtaining a government grant of NPR 300,000 for earthquake-affected families. Kalpana started the process and was able to receive all three tranches. She and Hari successfully built a new earthquake-resilient house.

Kalpana and Hari are now known as skilled masons in their community. They have also started to get work on neighbors' house construction sites. As they are hard-working and skilled, gradually people have started to trust them and have approached them for construction work. Kalpana recalls, "People who discriminated us for being Dalit before, now come to our house directly seeking our service." She shares that the bitter experiences of the past have changed, and they are now treated with dignity. In addition, they have even started to receive house construction work in other communities such as the Sherpa community. Their new-found work experience has improved their socio-economic life. Kalpana is happy that this has benefitted their children, "Now my children are enrolled in community schools and they are receiving quality education." She also shares that she has purchased four goats and buffaloes from their savings. Kalpana further adds, "This new life is like a dream for me and I would like to thank the project for giving us this happiness. It's difficult to believe that one training could have brought so much joy in our lives."

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## A New Reason to Live for an Elderly Man

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Seventy-eight-year old Parsuram Rai lives in the village of Dayla, Ward Chiuridada -7 of Diktel Rupakot Majhuwagadhi municipality, Khotang. His son went abroad to earn many years ago and he has never heard from him since; Parsuram has no idea where he is. However, Parsuram's small grandson and granddaughter, both of whom are under 10 years old, live with him. Parsuram has brothers, but they do nothing to support him.

When the earthquake destroyed his house, Parsuram was unable to reconstruct it on his own. He and his two grandchildren continued to live in the badly damaged building, even though it was clearly risky to do so. The roof of the house leaked, which added to the discomfort. Parsuram tried to continue farming the little land that he possesses, although it only provides enough to cover five months of food in the year. Other members of the community generally looked down upon him, given that his family members did nothing to help.

On becoming aware of Parsuram's situation, two Construction Resource Persons from EF-SR II started assisting him. They searched for masons and helped Parsuram to apply for the first tranche of the government grant for house reconstruction. Given Parsuram's poor financial situation, one of the CRPs also arranged for him to get some loans from his neighbors. Finally, the construction process started with technical assistance and advice from the CRP. As the construction fulfilled all the building code requirements, Parsuram received all three tranches of the government grant. Parsuram is naturally very thankful, sharing that, "Prior to the construction of this house, my only will to survive was my grandchildren, but now, this house is also a reason for happiness, and I want to live in it for ten years more." The CRP also feels a strong sense of job satisfaction in having had the opportunity to help an elderly person who had absolutely no other support.

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## Undeclared by Physical Disability

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In a little one-roomed house in a beautiful village sits Bir Bahadur Thapa Magar, smiling warmly. Bir Bahadur has a physical disability. His upper body functions well, but his hands are not formed properly. His lower body is deformed, and he cannot walk.

Bir Bahadur was born in the village of Daante, Dolakha. As a child, he lived with his father and sister, but his sister moved away after her marriage. Then when Bir Bahadur reached the age of around 22, his father died, leaving him alone. There was no-one to care for him. Fortunately, his brother-in-law came to the rescue, bringing him to his home in Ramechhap. In this way, Bir Bahadur came to live in Daduwaa ward 8, Doramba rural municipality. When asked his age, Bir Bahadur says that all he knows is that he is over 60 years old.

Bir Bahadur has lost all the family members who cared for him over the years, as they were all older than him and have died. It is now his nephew (his sister's son) who looks after him. Before the 2015 earthquake, Bir Bahadur lived in a makeshift house built of corrugated iron sheets and wood. However, this did not withstand the earthquake and his living conditions became even more miserable.

Bir Bahadur's name appeared on the National Reconstruction Authority (NRA) list of vulnerable persons. However, no one had contacted him. It was only when the EF-SR II team visited the area for a survey that they found out about Bir Bahadur's situation. Once this was known, they coordinated with local ward staff. As a result, Bir Bahadur's house was selected to be built as part of the 50-day mason training course. The land was given to him by his nephew.



Bir Bahadur used to get scared whenever there were thunderstorms in the area, or it rained heavily. "Now I have no such fears, every day I can live with contentment." He remembers his days at the old house and how people treated him then. Being a person with disability, people often scorned and neglected him. "My relatives did provide me food, but no one cared about my shelter. However, I am not someone who gives up easily. Today, my hopes and dreams have been fulfilled through the project. I feel lucky to be living in an earthquake resilient house."

Bir Bahadur also confided that initially when there were talks about the construction of his house, he could not quite believe that it would happen; it seemed to be a dream. However, he emphasized that, "With the completion of this house, I feel safe and secure."



← New house constructed for Bir Bahadur

*Bir Bahadur in a happy mood after the construction of his new house. He has applied Tika (red powder) on his forehead to celebrate →*



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## Persistence in Supporting a Hesitant Family

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At the age of 68, Kali Bahadur Tamang never thought that he would build a new house. Kali was living in the village of Majuward 2, Khadadevi rural municipality with his wife, three children and his sister. The family clearly fell below the poverty line, having little agricultural land, and few other sources of income to meet their daily needs.

Following the massive 2015 earthquake, Kali's house was destroyed and was declared fully damaged by the government. His name appeared on the NRA beneficiary list but having no ready cash he was unable to invest in constructing a new house. Instead, the family continued to live in their old, heavily damaged and dangerous house. Of course, they wished to build a new home, but unfortunately Kali damaged his hand in the earthquake and used the initial NPR 50,000 received from the NRA for treatment. Even this was not enough, and he had to borrow an additional NPR 30,000 for his treatment.

NRA engineers visiting the area tried to convince Kali to build a new house, pointing out that the old house was too risky to occupy. But Kali was reluctant to take on the extra burden of house construction given that he was already in debt for his hand treatment. Everyone urged him to start reconstruction, but the fear of huge debts made him resist.



The local CRP of the EF-SR project was Yagya Bahadur Karki. During his work visiting house owners to advise them on earthquake resilient construction, he met Kali. Like everyone else, he urged Kali to construct a new house – and Kali gave him the same reply. However, Yagya did not give up on the idea; instead, he discussed Kali's situation with the ward chairperson, Indra Bahadur Tamang. Yagya explained the training modality of the EF-SR project, and the fact that a house had to be selected for construction as part of the training modality. Finally, through the recommendation of the ward office, the project organized that the two-room model house used in the 50-day mason training would be Kali's. With facilitation through the local partner Associate Synergy Nepal, reconstruction work began on February 24, 2019 and was completed on March 27, 2019.

Yagya Bahadur Karki supported Kali in preparing the necessary documents and obtaining the timely release of the grant payments. Kali has received all three tranches and was very excited to see his new house materialize. He and his family happily conducted the rituals to make it their family home, and moved in. His comment to project staff was that, "Yagya Bahadur Karki is like a god to me! Now my family is living in our new house due to the support of Yagya and the Swiss project. If it was not for him and the project, we would still be living in the ruins of our old home."

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## Lal Bahadur Thami's New Home

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Following the 2015 earthquake, 68-year old Lal Bahadur Thami and his 60-year old wife lived in complete fear. All they had owned in terms of a house was a small shelter that was destroyed completely. They were very lucky to survive, but with their former home in ruins, they could only find shelter in a cowshed belonging to relatives. The couple had no idea about the possibility of obtaining any government support. Speaking only their own language and not understanding Nepali very well, they had not realized that they would be eligible for a grant. The Thami community to which the couple belongs lies rather separately from other communities and was cut off in the period following the earthquake as the access road was destroyed. Lal Bahadur got into a dispute with his son over this and they were not on talking terms. Earning his living through daily wage labor, Lal Bahadur's financial situation was very poor.

Even five years after the earthquake, Lal Bahadur still had no idea about the government grant for reconstruction. This was in part due to lack of information network, and his name was different from his citizenship card. One day, all the earthquake affected people of the Thami community were called together for a meeting hosted by the ward in collaboration with EF-SR project. Lal Bahadur did not attend, but his son Uma was present and listened carefully. CRP Khir Lal Tamang asked Uma to take him to meet his father. On seeing the condition in which Lal Bahadur was living, he realized that he was a priority case. Khir Lal informed Lal Bahadur about the government reconstruction scheme and the fact that his name was on the NRA list, meaning that he was eligible to receive the grant. With this positive news, and through the mediation of Khir Lal, father and son started talking with each other again. Uma promised to help with the house reconstruction, and Khir Lal explained to him all the necessary formalities. Lal Bahadur's two-room stone house is now complete, and he has received all three tranches of the NRA grant. The old couple can now live the rest of their days in relative comfort and peace of mind.

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## A Home for Masini

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Masini Newar of Khadadevi rural municipality is 88 years old. The time converted her into a widow. Her husband died 15 years ago. She had two sons, one has died and the other also lives in Kathmandu with his own family. So, she was forced to Masini survived the earthquake but her home was destroyed, and living alone, she is often sick. She has lived on the government's elderly person's allowance, augmented by occasional financial contributions from her son. Although she was listed on the NRA list of earthquake-affected households, she was totally unable to construct a new house by herself.

Construction Resource Person, Yagya Bahadur Karki and Om Bahadur Budhathoki came across Masini when surveying the houses in the ward. They talked with her and collected all her details. Meanwhile the ward chairperson also raised her case to the EF-SR project, requesting project support and committing to the backing of the ward. With support from the CRPs, Masini's application for the first tranche of the grant was made.

After discussions, it was decided that Masini's house would be selected as the model house for the 50-day mason training. This training was provided through the project partner Associate Synergy Nepal. The CRPs also contacted Masini's grandson, 32-year old Dan Bahadur Newar, who agreed to come and help. He arranged for the materials required for house construction. Thus, work on Masini's one-room earthquake resistant house started on 6<sup>th</sup> March and was completed on 26<sup>th</sup> April 2019.

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## Bringing a Smile to the Face of an Elderly Man

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Seventy-eight-year old Riphuri Sherpa lives in Bhusinga ward 8 of Khijidemba rural municipality, Okhaldhunga. Although his house was badly damaged in the 2015 earthquake, he and his wife Mingma Lhamu Sherpa continued to occupy it. The couple live alone; their three sons have moved into separate homes, with one now living in India.

When last visited, Riphuri was excited about moving into their new home. It was his house was used as a model for the 50-day construction training. The EF-SR team in Khijidemba had gone through the names on the NRA list of vulnerable households and found some that were listed as 'house not reconstructed'. Riphuri Sherpa's name was amongst them. CRP Subhash Tamang accordingly sought him out to inform him about his entitlements.

On arriving at Riphuri's house, Subhash had to wait for quite a while as Riphuri had gone to the forest some distance away to cut fodder for his animals. On returning, Riphuri was quite surprised to meet Subhash – and even more surprised to learn that his name was on the NRA beneficiary list. He was also rather skeptical of the concept of the government giving money for house reconstruction and hesitated to make any commitment. It took some time for Subhash and the rest of the team to explain the procedure in detail, and the necessary documentation. However, finally Riphuri was convinced.

The EF-SR team consulted with the elected ward members and the NRA staff of Bhusinga, following which a full agreement with the NRA was concluded in January 2019.

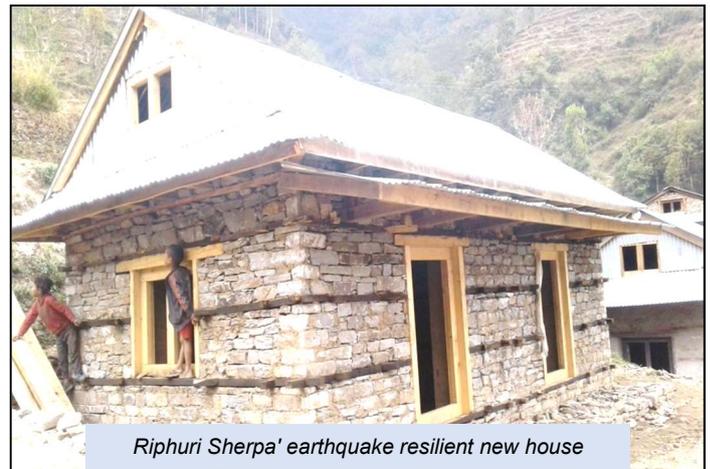
With the agreement in place, Riphuri was worried about how to construct an earthquake resilient house. These concerns were due to the local unavailability of construction materials such as timber and stone, as well as his lack of money.

The EF-SR team took this as a challenge. They discussed the matter with the people selected to undertake mason training, and one group was ready to build Riphuri's house. The team also met with Riphuri and Mingma's youngest son, as a result of which he agreed to manage the necessary materials and money. The son took loans from neighbors. In February 2019, construction of the house started, and during the 50-day training period itself, Riphuri received the first, second and third tranches. The son also participated in the training.

Seeing his solid, single floor stone and timber house completed, Riphuri commented, "I am happy because I have not just built a normal house, I have a safe and earthquake resilient house – and that has brought a smile to our faces."



*Riphuri Sherpa' old house damaged by earthquake*



*Riphuri Sherpa' earthquake resilient new house*

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## Abused but Defiant: A House of Her Own for Maya

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Maya Thapa not only was a victim of the 2015 earthquake; she also had to tolerate regular abuse from her husband and his second wife. A resident of Sunaarpaani Machawari ward 5, Manthali municipality, Ramechhap, she lived in her elderly parents' house to avoid the misery of her married home. Her husband lived with his other family in Kathmandu, her son and daughter-in-law also lived separately, so she had no one other than her old parents to turn to for emotional support. Although her name appeared on the NRA list of earthquake-affected victims, she did not have the courage to build a house.

As the CRP for the area, Lok Bahadur Khatri met with Maya and got to know her whole story. He then explained to her the social and technical support that the project could provide her. Maya did not take long to think about it; she replied, "If you and your project will provide technical support and help look for construction workers, then I will start the process within a few days."

Lok Bahadur contacted local construction workers and facilitated an agreement between them and Maya. The project supported the selection of construction materials and supervised the whole construction process.



All three tranches of the government grant were released without any problem and Maya's house was completed within a month. The construction workers were flexible enough to agree that they would only be paid when the tranche was released. However, the construction process was not always smooth as Maya's husband's son from his second marriage constantly interfered during the process. But in the end Maya, got her house. She commented, "As someone who was abused by her husband's family and as a single woman, I am really glad to receive this support from your project. I really want to thank you."

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## A New House for an Old Woman

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The devastating earthquake of 2015 and its after-effects have left their mark on 70-year old Chyauki Maya Achhami. "I can never erase that day out of my memory. I can never forget it. The earthquake destroyed my house that we had built so diligently." Her husband had died before the earthquake, and the couple had no children, so Chyauki Maya felt alone in the world. Even two years after the earthquake, she had made no attempt to begin constructing a new house. Her neighbors had helped her to obtain the first tranche of government funding for reconstruction; with this she had conducted makeshift repairs to her old house and continued to live there.

CRP Deepkala Shrestha met Chyauki Maya in the course of visiting the area and got to know her story. She confided that she was frightened about living in her old house, but had no other option, given that she had no source of income other than the government social security allowance. This was barely enough for her to survive, and certainly was not enough for building a house. Chyauki Maya had discussed reconstruction with her nephew, but this had not worked out. Deepkala explained to Chyauki Maya the assistance provided through the EF-SR project. She also explained the building materials required, the land selection and the system of the government (NRA) grant for reconstruction. Chyauki Maya agreed to go ahead with reconstruction through project assistance, and Deepkala helped in finding construction workers. The second tranche of the NRA grant was paid out within 35 days of request, and through regular technical assistance and punctual work on the part of the masons, the house was completed within 45 days. Upon house completion, Deepkala coordinated with the ward office and the third government tranche was released as well. Chyauki Maya performed the religious ceremony to move into her new house and settled in comfortably. She was full of praise for Deepkala and the project, saying how happy she was to have the chance to live in a new house before dying, and encouraged her to continue helping the elderly and vulnerable.

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## His Wishes Fulfilled in Old Age

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Tilak Bahadur Karki has lived to reach 100 years, but the last four years of his long life have been miserable and uncomfortable. A resident of Sunarpaani ward 5, Manthali municipality, the house in which he and his wife lived was heavily damaged in the 2015 earthquake. Although their names were included on the NRA list of earthquake-affected people, it was impossible for the old couple to think of reconstruction. Who would organize the construction materials, who would hire the laborers?

They had no idea what to do. They even said that it was better to die. The EF-SR project CRP became very emotional when listening to their story and promised to give them every assistance. The CRP motivated them to undertake reconstruction, describing in detail the process and the technical support that the project would provide. The old couple agreed.

The CRP first organized a team of local construction workers, and then facilitated a meeting between them and Tilak Bahadur Karki. The CRP also coordinated the grant application process, so that after the plinth band construction, the second tranche was received on time.



With efficient planning, the construction was completed within 40 days and the request for the third tranche made and received. The construction was also made easier due to the flexibility of the workers as they agreed to be paid their remaining wages only once the third tranche was received. Tilak and his wife are now very happily living in their new house.

# STORIES OF CONSTRUCTION RESOURCE PERSONS

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## Challenging Gender Stereotypes

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Laxmi Karki KC is 26 years old, and lives in Makadum, ward 6, Khadadevi rural municipality, Ramechhap. She could not get very far with her education as was married at an early age. Laxmi started running a small tea shop near to the ward office. This helped the household finances; it also meant that she got to hear about local affairs. One day, she overheard talk about a training for masons. This interested her, and she dared to hope that she could also participate. However, she lived in a joint family with her parents-in-law and had a two-year old daughter, so knew it would be difficult to gain family approval. It almost seemed impossible.

In raising the matter with her family, Laxmi pointed out that the training provided childcare facilities and that there was also the provision of lunch. Her arguments were persuasive, and her in-laws agreed. Laxmi undertook the week-long training (organized through National Reconstruction) and received the completion certificate. Despite this, she found that no-one in the community wished to employ her as a mason, saying that a woman could not do such physical work. Laxmi went back to working at the tea shop. About a year later, she once again overheard useful ward gossip in her tea shop. This time it was about a job vacancy for trained masons for which women would be given priority. All the women who had undertaken the original training sent in an application.

Laxmi passed the written exam as well as the interview and was selected to become a CRP. For Laxmi, "This job was such a dream come true because it gave me the opportunity to prove myself to the people who formerly rejected my services." She has been enthusiastic in providing technical support to homeowners wishing to reconstruct their houses and found that the job gave her new confidence. Now she no longer hesitates to interact with community members or to state her opinion. The job fits well with her other responsibilities, allowing her to give time to household matters as well as to take her daughter to school. Of course, she appreciates the money that she has made as well.

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## A Changed Life through Mason Training

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Ram Maya Tamang, aged 23, lives in Tilpung ward 7, Likhutamakoshi rural municipality with her mother and two younger sisters; their father died three years ago. Ram Maya completed her education up to grade 12 and was keen to continue her studies to become an overseer. However, the family finances were too limited for her to fulfill this ambition.

Although the family owns some land, it only produces enough for six months food. They also keep buffalos and sell the milk. After her father's death, responsibility for earning the family's income fell upon her mother's shoulders, although as the eldest daughter, Ram Maya also had to play her part. Both women worked as agricultural laborers to ensure that the two younger girls could continue their schooling.

In early 2019, Ram Maya was selected to participate in an EF-SR II 50-day mason training. This was organized through the service provider F-skill Pvt. Ltd and took place over 2<sup>nd</sup> Feb to 23<sup>rd</sup> March. With the mason skills that she learned in the training, Ram Maya has been engaged in constructing eight houses and earned more than NPR, 80,000. Then in January 2020, she was selected as a mobile mason through National Reconstruction Authority (NRA). This job opportunity has given her the chance to further develop her skills. Having passed the skill test examination and been certified under the National Skills Testing Board (NSTB) as a level one mason, she now plans to go further in the construction industry. "To achieve this dream and to enhance my skills, I plan to take the level two mason training."



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## Financial Independence as a Mobile Mason

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Twenty-six-year old Meena Khutte lives in Duragaon ward 1, Likhutamakoshi rural municipality, Ramechhap with her husband, two children and mother-in-law. As members of the Dalit community, the family has few resources and only owns enough land to provide food for three months of the year. Meena's husband works in the ward office, as a member of support staff.

Meena reached grade ten at school before she married, but after that, her life was focused on running the household. During the farming season, she also worked as an agricultural laborer, for which she received just NPR 300 in daily wages. Meanwhile, through his job at the ward office, Meena's husband heard about the 50-day mason training being organized through EF-SR and encouraged her to apply.

No woman from their community had ever taken part in such a form of training, neither had any woman worked in the construction sector as a mason. However, Meena took courage and participated in the training over 2<sup>nd</sup> February to 13<sup>th</sup> April 2019. She completed the course without missing a single class and was certified as a level one mason through the skill test examination of the National Skill Testing Board (NSTB).

After the training, Meena's husband encouraged her to find work in the construction sector. With others, she was employed in the construction of five houses in her community. From this, she earned NPR 55,000-60,000 which she used for her children's schooling as well as general household purposes. Then one day in early January 2020, she heard about a vacancy for an NRA mobile mason and applied for the post. She was selected.

As an NRA mobile mason, Meena feels she has achieved something important in life: she is financially independent. She used to face many humiliations and was often the brunt of negative comments concerning the supposed weakness of houses constructed by women. She recalls that those very people who used to deride her during her training now respect her and seek her technical support on earthquake resilient construction.

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# The Importance of Technical Skills for Reconstruction

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The life of Ram Bahadur Darlami Magar has been completely changed as a result of his 50-day masonry skills training. Aged 22, from Tilpung ward 7, Likhutamakoshi rural municipality, Ramechhap, Ram Bahadur grew up in a family with very little agricultural land or other resources. This meant that he stopped his studies in 10<sup>th</sup> grade and married early – working as a daily wage laborer to earn a livelihood for himself, his wife and their two small children. The young family had no house of their own but lived with relatives. Unfortunately, Ram Bahadur's wife fell sick; this meant that he could only take work in the locality rather than looking for better job opportunities further away. He worked as an unskilled laborer on construction sites and as a seasonal farm laborer.

It was on meeting CRP Dhan Maya Khadka that Ram Bahadur first heard about the 50-day mason training and expressed an interest to participate. The training in his locality was organized by F-skill Pvt. Ltd and was held from 2<sup>nd</sup> February to 13<sup>th</sup> April 2019. Ram Bahadur completed the course without missing a single class and was certified as level one mason through the National Skill Testing Board (NSTB) skill test examination.

Ram Bahadur's observes, "As my father is a mason in my local area, I used to dream to take up this craft. So, before the mason training provided by the Swiss project, I used to work in construction with my father." Since completing his mason training, he has been upgrading his knowledge and skills and is now regularly engaged in construction work. He has been engaged in the construction of some eight houses and earned over NPR 100,000. Ram Bahadur comments, "Now I realize the value of practical education and vocational skills; they are very important in creating employment opportunities."

He further shared that, "Previously, I used to think about going abroad to find work and gain a good income. But I was wrong; skills and training based on the market demand are what is important in the creation of jobs for the young generation. Through learning vocational skills, we young people can be equipped to find work locally and thus reduce youth unemployment."

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## CRPs are Agents of Social Change

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Jagat Bahadur Lama is now in his early 70's and had never thought that he would build a new house in his old age. A resident of Dimipokhari ward 2, Sunapati rural municipality, Ramechhap he lived alone after the death of his wife and their only son. He also has a physical disability but receives no disability allowance. Jagat has a small plot of land on which he grows some vegetables for food, but otherwise it is his sister who supports him; fortunately, she lives nearby. The massive 2015 earthquake destroyed Jagat's house, which was declared fully damaged by the government. His name was placed on the NRA beneficiary list, and since he was a single man of 70, living alone, he was also named on the NRA vulnerable list.

The NRA engineers recommended that Jagat should construct a new house as his old one was assessed as too dangerous for habitation. However, Jagat was reluctant. He did not want to take on the burden of house construction given his physical status and his age – as well as his lack of funds. To everyone suggesting to him that he should construct a new house, he replied that since he had few years left to live and had no successor, he might as well continue living in his old house and avoid any additional burden. He did not even have an agreement with the NRA for obtaining a government grant as he was determined not to construct the new house.

The CRP in Jagat's ward was Ram Bahadur Magar. He had met Jagat a few months previously while surveying the households that had not started reconstruction. He talked with Jagat about reconstruction, but Jagat gave him the same reply that he gave to everyone: he was not interested. Even after frequent visits by Ram Bahadur, he maintained this position.

However, Ram Bahadur did not give up. He kept up his visits, slowly convincing Jagat about the importance of earthquake resilient houses and assuring him about the support that he would receive from the project in obtaining the government grant. He pointed out that Jagat could construct a single roomed house; as he was listed as a vulnerable person, he was not required to build anything bigger. Ram Bahadur also made an estimate of the cost of house construction in terms of labor and materials. Through this estimate, he showed Jagat that a one-room house would only cost slightly more than the government grant of NPR 300,000.

Ram Bahadur also managed to get other community members to support his arguments, and to agree to help in arranging masons and materials if Jagat was ready to construct his house. Finally, Jagat was persuaded.

At the time of writing, the house construction was very nearly complete, and Jagat had already received all three tranches of the government (NRA) grant. He was very excited to see his new house and was preparing to move into it, after completing the necessary rituals. Asked by the project staff about how he was feeling, he replied as follows. “The period of house construction was like the effort to get education; it was not easy and gave many worries. However, getting a new house is like getting a degree - the satisfaction of which cannot be described in words.”



← Jagat Bahadur's old house

Jagat describing the construction story of his new house →



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## Helping a Landless Gain Justice

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Yubraj Acharya, comes from ward 1 Diktel Rupakot Majhuwagadhi Municipality, Khotang. He was employed as a CRP under the EF-SR project in his home area, where he is very familiar with the terrain and local people. Following the appointment of CRPs in early 2018, the project conducted a baseline survey in June 2018 to determine the status of reconstruction and identify the households that required special assistance in applying for the government grant. Yubraj realized during this survey that many people were unable to reconstruct their houses due to economic and social problems.

One such person was Durga Kumari Darji. As a 77-year old single woman, she had no agricultural land or other source of income for her livelihood. The one plot of land that she owned was that on which her house had stood before it was demolished by earthquake. Some while after this, a road survey had been conducted and her land was demarcated as falling in the path of the main road to the town. In this way she became landless and unable to build a house, although she was eligible for a government grant. Durga Kumari was living in a small hut made of bamboo and straw, for which she had to pay rent. With no land and no money, she despaired of ever living any better. No-one was prepared to help.

Yubraj had developed a good working relationship with ward representatives and the local people. He brought Durga Kumari's case to the attention of the ward representatives and lobbied for her to receive the government grant of NPR 200,000 that is available for earthquake-affected landless to purchase a plot of land. He facilitated Durga Kumari's application for this grant, and persuaded a local landowner, with whom he had a good understanding, to provide the land at a cheap rate. Given Durga Kumari's sad situation, the landowner agreed to the land sale, and thus Durga Kumari became a landowner once again.

Durga Kumari can hardly believe that her luck has changed. Her words to Yubraj were as follows, "You are more than a son to me. You have done a lot for this old lady. I cannot give you anything, but my blessings will always be with you."

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## A Role Model for Other Women

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Twenty-year old Dhanmaya Khadka is a permanent resident of Tilpung ward 7 Likhutamakoshi rural municipality. The opportunity to become a CRP under the EF-SR project literally changed her life. Dhanmaya lives with her family of five members – the others being her mother, father, brother and her aunt, who has a physical disability.

Dhanmaya dreamed of studying technical education after completing her SLC but given the family's very limited finances she dropped this aspiration and continued studying in her village even though she scored good marks in the SLC exam. This limited her options, and she was not so sure about how her career might develop.

The 2015 earthquake damaged the house of Dhanmaya's family so badly that they had to take up temporary residence in small bamboo hut. Most of the houses in the area were destroyed and re-construction was a big challenge due to the absence of skilled masons amongst the community members. In the early days following the earthquake, people struggled to return to their daily life due to fear of the frequent aftershocks.

Days passed, and relief packages - including different skills training opportunities - gradually came to the village. Dhanmaya come to know about a mason training from the ward office and showed interest in participating. This was at a time that women's involvement in construction work was considered rather a social taboo, so Dhanmaya remembers facing critical comments.

Fortunately, the reconstruction of Dhanmaya's house was selected as a model for the 50-day training practical course for trainee masons. In participating, Dhanmaya challenged the gender norms in her society and completed the course with ability and enthusiasm. She was certified by the Nepal Skill Testing Board (NSTB) as a level one mason and is competent in earthquake resilient construction techniques along with basic skills as a mason. Some while later, she heard that the EF-SR project was

looking for trained and certified masons to work as CRPs. She applied as was selected. From April 2018 to June 2020, she worked as a CRP in her ward. In the process, she became familiar with different issues that were delaying the re-construction process. Broadening her knowledge in technical aspects in different field conditions, she worked in coordination with NRA technicians to provide technical support to earthquake-affected households.

Dhanmaya also supported the NRA technical team and villagers in the timely inspection of construction sites, and the efficient handling of documentation in the ward office. This contributed to speeding up the grant release process in her ward. She also supported many vulnerable individuals in reconstructing their houses. One such woman was Fulmaya Adhikari. As an old single woman, Fulmaya was unable to re-construct her house even after the completion of the agreement with the NRA for a grant. Dhanmaya was determined that she should have a house and took over the organization of the whole process. She managed all the necessary paperwork, organized the construction materials and workers, and ensured that the inspection work was done on a timely basis. Upon completion of her one-roomed house and the payment of the full NRA grant, Fulmaya commented, "I am an old single woman with no money, strength, support or resources, but Dhanmaya stood by my side as if I was her own family. Through her I have a safe house in which to live for the rest of my life".

Dhanmaya's involvement in the construction sector has set a positive example to others. She is changing societal perspectives about women working in technical positions, enhancing and promoting women's empowerment. According to Dhanmaya, "The lessons and skills that I learned from the 50-day training and as a CRP uplifted my professional career". Currently, Dhanmaya is continuing her construction career as a mobile mason under the NRA in the same district. She added, "If we have skills in our hands, there is no further struggle to search for our identity and for opportunities in this world".

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## Empowering the Community as a CRP

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Forty-three-year old Raj Kumar Shrestha is a resident of Manthali municipality. He grew up in a large family of eight, numbering his parents and five sisters. His parents struggled financially, as a result of which Raj Kumar was only able to continue his education up to grade 12. His sisters all got married and as the only son in the family, Raj Kumar many responsibilities. Eventually, he got married and had a family of his own. Things were especially tough when he had his own child. At one point, he thought of going abroad to earn, however, he quickly dropped the idea, thinking that it would be another struggle. He commented, "I would rather struggle here in my own country, being with my family members, rather than struggling on my own in a foreign land." He then took various short skill training courses such as candle making training and a 51-day agricultural training.

In 2006, Raj Kumar applied for the vacancy of a teacher at Hari Sidhhi Lower Secondary School and got the job. However, he resigned from this position when the devastating earthquake struck in April 2015. The whole village was affected by the earthquake. His house was damaged too, and he was trying to think of ways to support his family. In the meantime, he had the opportunity to participate in a seven-day mason training organized by the Creative Youth Association and Poverty Alleviation Fund. After this training, he was involved in the construction of 14 houses. At the time, he heard that a Swiss project was looking for a Construction Resource Person (CRP). He was interviewed and selected for the position. He started his journey as a CRP in November 2017 in Gelu ward 11, Manthali municipality.

Raj Kumar looks back on his journey as a CRP having already completed 29 months. He has many fond memories of working with the beneficiaries, as well as with ward and municipality offices. He believes that the support and coordination of all parties concerned has made the process full of learning and allowed so much reconstruction to occur. Now that the EF-SR project is coming to an end, Raj Kumar comments, "I feel a little sad as I will be parting ways with the many people that I met through the project. However, I am extremely happy with my experience of working in the community with the people. I learned a lot. "

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## Helping Community Members is not just for Salary

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Balkrishna Moktan, aged 35, is a resident of Gunsal ward 5, Doramba rural municipality, Ramechhap. For the past two years he has been working as a CRP for the EF-SR project. Balkrishna comes from a family of very limited means. He studied up to SLC (School Leaving Certificate, grade 10), but failed the exam – at least in part because he had to spend a lot of time helping in household matters and thus had little time to study.

As a young man, life in the village was difficult for Balkrishna due to the Maoist conflict. He therefore moved to Kathmandu where he worked as an unskilled labor in a construction company. In a short time, he was promoted to the position of a skilled mason. His honesty and hard work were recognized by the company, and he continued in the job for five years.

Once the Maoist conflict ended, Balkrishna returned to his village, determined to continue his studies. He passed the SLC exam in 2008 and has now completed 10+2 level. He struggled hard to find a good job but found nothing; as a result, he decided to continue working as a mason in Kathmandu. His dream to work in a recognized company was always unfulfilled due to a lack of official certificates related to his trade. After the 2015 earthquake, Balkrishna got the opportunity to participate in the 50-day mason training organized through EF-SR. Having completed the training, he started working in earthquake-resilient reconstruction in his community. For this, he earned good wages (NPR 1,250 to 1,500 per day). Under his leadership, more than 20 earthquake-resilient homes were constructed. Then in May 2018, he was selected as a CRP for the EF-SR project in his ward. In this capacity, he provided technical assistance to local homeowners and masons in his community and has already trained some 60 to 70 young people as skilled masons. He is an enthusiastic trainer and coach, devoting extra time in the mornings and evenings to guide young people on the correct cutting of corner stones and similar matters. He is well known and appreciated in the community and has earned the title of 'Social Technical Person'.

Balkrishna's work is also appreciated by NRA engineers and by the ward chairperson Ganga Bahadur Tamang. The latter commented, "We are very lucky to get Balkrishna Moktan as CRP in our ward, as following his appointment villagers can construct safer houses in compliance with the norms of earthquake-resistant buildings. They are also happy to get the [NRA grant] tranches in time". Balkrishna's colleagues Khir Bahadur Shrestha and Santa Lal Tamang observe that, "Balkrishna Moktan is different from others, as he loves to work for the community as a social worker". They add, "Under the guidance of Balkrishna, we earn NPR 40,000 to 45,000 per month as skilled masons, but he only earns NPR 30,000 per month from his job at a CRP. Yet he is happy and cheerful to support his community as a social worker and he is very honest in his work."

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## Fulfilling and Respected Work Close to Home

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As a young man, Lalit Bahadur Nepali saw few prospects for work in his home village. He has a minor physical disability in one of his feet, but this did not stop him travelling to India where he worked for 12 years, sending money home to his family. After the 2015 earthquake he returned home to his family in Likhu rural municipality, Okhaldunga. His house had collapsed, but fortunately, his family of seven, including his parents, was safe.

Lalit made a small temporary shelter with bamboo and shifted his family there. He also initiated his application for the government reconstruction grant and received all three tranches. He started to build his new house in 2016, taking a loan to complete it. Once his family had a good roof over their own heads, he started working locally as a non-skilled laborer. In 2017, he participated in the 50-day mason training conducted in his area through the EF-SR project. Having completed this training, he became known as skilled mason in his village. Lalit says, "People now trust me more than they did before and call me for house construction works." After some time, the EF-SR project announced a vacancy for a CRP in the village; Lalit applied and got the job, starting in June 2018. He smiles when he says, "People in the community think of me as an 'engineer'."

The people in the community respect and trust Lalit in his technical knowledge. He is also known as a social problem solver, as people often come to him for advice on more personal matters. He says, "I feel proud of myself. Most importantly, this short-term work gave me more satisfaction than the 12 years of hard labor that I did in India. I am happily staying with my family in my own country. I feel that I have earned skills that I will continue to use for the rest of my life, and I'm confident that I will earn enough to live a simple life with my family from these skills. My role as an unknown migrant has ended and my new role as a renowned community resource person has begun."



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