

## PREPARED FOR NEXT FLOOD



**In the flat, south western part of Nepal, the poor villages are submerged by floods every single year in the rainy season. Previously the villagers suffered major losses during the annual floods, but today they know what to do to withstand the damage.**

17.09.2012 by *Marianne Lemvig*

Seven big bunches of garlic peep down from a branch attached to the beams of the top storey of the house. The storey was put on top of beams across and boards along the walls which poke out from the wrinkled and ribbed sand coloured house. Inside three or four coloured sacks hang in a rope down from the ceiling.



© Marianne lemvig

“We have our important papers and possessions up there, and we also hang up supplies of rice and grain on the second floor so they are safe when the floods come. And even though we can stand up straight and it is a bit crowded, we seek refuge up there so we are safe from water and snakes while there are floods,” says 45 year old Tikarani Devi Chaudhary, who lives together with twelve members of the family in the village, Sonafata, where there are about 900 inhabitants.

We are two or three kilometres from the Indian border in Kailali District in Nepal, where partially dried up rivers and high, lonely trees around the houses are the only thing that break the flat view over the pot-holed gravel road, dusty yellow wheat fields and a lot of uneven stubble fields that show that the wheat is being harvested by hand.

### Expensive renovation

It has cost Tikarani and her family 25.000 Nepalese rupees (about 1.700 kroner) to build the top floor on the house. Money for the renovation came from, among others, her son who is a migrant worker in India and who sends money home to them every month.

They learned the extra storey trick from DanChurchAid’s local partner FAYA (Forum for Awareness and Youth Activity).

“We don’t normally build high houses. I belong to the Tharu people, and we have a tradition of building one storey houses. But after the big flood in 2008, where many of us lost everything we owned, the people from FAYA came and advised us about how we could reduce the damage after the floods. One of the suggestions was to make the house higher by building an extra storey so we can store food and take shelter when the water rises around us,” tells Tikarani, who in addition to renovating the house, cooking, cleaning, harvesting, looking after the pigs, fishing, washing clothes and caring for grandchildren is also a member of the village disaster committee.

### Active disaster committee

The committee was formed in Tikarani’s village, Sonafata, after the flood in 2008, and the men behind it are from DanChurchAid’s partner FAYA.

“We have, among other things, helped the villagers to form a committee where the members organize and plan what to do before, during and after the next flood. We also hold rescue exercises with the villagers and help them with billboards that are put up round about in the villages in the whole area with information and warnings about the water level,” tells 37 year old Dharmaraj Pathak, who is the director of FAYA.



© marianne lemvig

Tikarani adds that before FAYA began to work in the area in 2008, the villagers didn’t know anything about disaster preparedness or disaster response plans. They were unprepared, insecure and without a safety net.

“We know that floods come every year. We have always known that – and we can’t do anything about it. But now we know how we can prepare ourselves best and

reduce the scope of the damage,” says Tikarani Devi Chaudhary.

### Safety net of money

“Just now we have monthly meetings of the committee where we talk about how we will prepare ourselves for the rainy season in June and after that. We are making disaster response plans so we know exactly what to do when the disaster hits us. I help to collect cereal seed and also money from people for a savings fund that can pay doctors’ fees if people are bit by snakes during the floods or there are outbreaks of sickness. People can borrow money from the fund if their houses are ruined or their crops are swept away. Just now there is no interest on the loans – and we agree from family to family how the repayment will take place. The fund has made a terrific difference in our lives,” says Tikarani Devi Chaudhary.

The villagers give about 130 – 140 kroner per family, which can easily be 12 – 15 people. Just now the disaster fund is about 4.000 kroner of which 700 kroner is put in by DanChurchAid’s partner FAYA as start-up money. The typical monthly salary for a day labourer like most people there is about 250 – 300 kroner, so the fund is extra help in a pinch.

### Poor people surrounded by five rivers

Since 2008, when DanChurchAid via FAYA has been working in the area, a whole lot of bamboo boats, disaster response plans, disaster committees and rescue exercises have come to the villages. Some have been better known than others.

“The first time the villagers saw a life jacket they asked “what on earth is that?”. They didn’t know what it was. But during the rescue exercise that we arranged they tried the life jackets themselves – also in the river. And they floated,” tells the FAYA director, Dharma Raj Pathak.

The life jackets, helmets, boats, plans and extra storeys on the houses have been a blessing for the villagers in Thapapur District. The area is surrounded by five rivers; Mohana, Kanara, Kanda, Patharaiya, and Karnali. The rivers transport a lot of sand and silt down from up in the Himalaya and Churiya mountain chains, and cause recurring floods in the rainy season. Sand and silt are dumped around the river and that means that the river bottom gets higher and higher.

“Every year poor families lose all or part of their crops. Their houses are damaged by the water, their animals drown and sometimes there are also deaths among the villagers. The area is inhabited by poor, marginalised people, like the Tharu people, but there are also poor dalits and high caste people”, tells Dharma Raj Pathak.

“Especially women, dalits, handicapped and marginalised ethnic groups are extremely vulnerable when the water rises. They are the ones we focus on particularly in our work. They are already poor, and the floods push them even farther down. They can’t move to another place. If they own some land, just a little piece of earth, they won’t give it up because it gives them food on the table for a couple of months every year,” says Dharma Raj Pathak.

### Respect from the men

Tikarani Devi Chaudhary has felt the difference.

“Previously I didn’t have an especially central role in the village. But now that I am a member of the disaster committee I have got more self-confidence. People – also men – listen to me when I give advice about how best to protect themselves and their possessions against floods. I am heard,” says Tikarani with a big smile and looks up at a jar with holes in the bottom and a woven basket that are hanging in a bunch up under the straw overhang where we have retreated to shelter from the heavy heat. The basket is a part of the Tharu people’s traditional fishing equipment.



© Marianne Lemvig

“I fish in the river – especially in the rainy season when I’m not busy harvesting our wheat, and if the whole area isn’t completely under water” says Tikarani Devi Chaudhary. “We grow winter wheat on our 10 katha of land (edit., 700 m<sup>2</sup>) so until the rainy season begins I don’t have much time to fish. Because either I’m working on my own field or as a day labourer on someone else’s field. But, I do manage a little bit. And I sometimes catch big fish – but mostly small ones”, tells Tikarani.

Along the side of the house an open wooden arch with a fishnet attached rests. On the dry ground there is fishing net – it is spread out and looks like a butterfly wing and is ready to be used.

**What DanChurchAid Does**

Since 2008, DanChurchAid has helped poor, vulnerable villagers in Thapapur, Khailad and Ramshikharjhala in Kailali District as well as Sankrpur in Kanchanpur District in western Nepal through FAYA.

We have helped with, among other things:

- Organising disaster committees
- Training villagers, also with rescues exercises
- Advice and help to build an extra storey on houses
- Billboards with information on the water level and disaster prevention advice
- Boats, helmets and life jackets
- Training in building bamboo boats
- Capacity building of the local population and staff at national and district level in Nepal
- Training in modern agricultural techniques that give the farmers a much better harvest than before.

[Like](#)

Be the first of your friends to like this.

[Share](#)