

Generalversammlung 2015 „Erinnern – lernen – in die Zukunft schauen“

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## REDE MONA SHERPA

### 60 Jahre Helvetas in Nepal. Neue Aufgaben in einer Gesellschaft im Wandel

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Dear friends and members of HELNETAS,

Namaste from Nepal!

I stand here today, to walk you through the history of HELNETAS Swiss Intercooperation Nepal to the present day, also touching upon the changing context of our work. I would like to highlight three key messages as I do so.

1. Growing along with the country,
2. Shifting from a “blueprint” approach to one tailored to local efforts and innovations, and
3. Incorporating social dimensions in development work.

I will end my deliberations with an outlook on the continued relevance of HELNETAS in Nepal, and the strategic direction that we need to take in the changing context.

For us, the 60-year journey through different contexts in Nepal has been worth all the effort, as the organization has also matured through its experiences and different roles. Through it all, what has remained constant are our values and principles, enabling us to adapt and progress from past to present.

From the fall of the regime of the hereditary prime ministers – the Ranas - in the 1950s to the struggle for democracy in the 1980s, throughout the 10 year conflict in the late 1990s to the present federal republic, Nepal’s people have continuously searched for prosperity and a brighter future. It was HOPE that led the entire country through these various phases, and HELNETAS was there as we trod the path of our development, right from the 1950s with the arrival of the Swiss Nepal Forward team. This team was invited by the then Government of Nepal to provide technical development support. By 1955, members of the team had established in Switzerland the **Schweizerisches Hilfswerk für Ausseuropäische Gebiete**. Dairy was the starting point of collaboration in 1956, but soon other initiatives, particularly related to vocational skills training, suspension bridges and agronomy were added. The collaboration was formalized in 1959 with an agreement signed with the government of Nepal, and by the mid-1960s, many Swiss experts were working in Nepal as members of the Swiss Association for Technical Assistance, or SATA. SATA’s work was integrated into the government’s five-year development plan to pursue socio-economic development in Nepal.

Throughout Nepal’s tumultuous political development, HELNETAS has continued its support. And with the changing context, the working modality also shifted from a purely technical focus to support for overall societal transformation. Work during the 10 years of the Maoist movement in Nepal was a particular upheaval for HELNETAS, but with our low profile, locally based and value driven attitude, along with conflict sensitive programme management, we survived that phase – and learned from it. HELNETAS did not halt its collaboration with the Nepali people for a single day! Issues of governance, peace, and social inclusion emerged, as did the importance of sector-wide development. We realised the important complementary roles of different actors, including the private sector. A huge number of Nepalese, mainly men - as family

bread-winners - migrated outside the country for work and safety during and after conflict. Our work with the community took new directions following this phase, with climate change also becoming a major intervention area, as a national and global priority. Thus, the country strategy of HELNETAS progressively incorporated new development agendas, according to the evolving context. We became a major contributor to changing development paradigms in Nepal. Right now the country is working on its new constitution, encompassing issues such as the possibility of becoming a federal state, and reinforcing the rights of its diverse citizens. At HELNETAS we are also working on a new strategy, taking into account differing future scenarios and the added value that our organisation can bring amidst the increasing number of development agencies in Nepal, with their varied global and national agendas.

Nepal still suffers from disparity based on class, caste, gender, geographical remoteness, vulnerability and age. We recognise the number one priority as being the eradication of structural poverty induced by the rigid cultural values of the Hindu religion, and exacerbated by the destruction of infrastructure during the conflict period. Structural poverty takes the form of gender and caste based inequality and discrimination, power in the hands of just a few people, and the marginalisation of ethnic minorities - leading to a crisis in their identity. Only by dealing with it can real development in Nepal take place.

“Blue print” approaches - basically those tested and developed outside the country by development experts and fitted to Nepal - will not be successful in today, even if they were in the past. Then, the construction of suspension bridges, water supply schemes, and dairies as well as the introduction of new crops such as the potato had a hugely positive impact, giving new avenues for economic development at local and national level. Our efforts of those days, mainly channelled through the government, will not yield the good results of the past unless implemented in a participatory way. Following the conflict, we have diversified into different thematic and geographical areas, and engaged more localised expertise and resources. Water use master plans are generated in consultation with local people to capture and cater to their needs, and then managed by the same people. Diversification into localised agricultural production has added value to Nepal’s agricultural development plan. Examples of such local initiatives include river-bed farming in the Terai, and new income-generating opportunities based on bananas, coffee, lemon grass, vegetables and non-timber forest products. We have also introduced innovative uses of technology – allowing, for example, the effective storage of mandarins, the use of forest waste to generate new products such as bio-charcoal, and integrated pest management in adapting to climate change. We have shifted from one way of operating to multiple ways of collaboration with civil society, the private sector and government partners at both local and national level. Partnership that adds value and creates complementarity has been our key working modality.

As an organization, we uphold the principle of power in the hands of people, supporting their rights and opportunities to determine their own development. We have understood that focusing on infrastructural development alone is not sustainable, and that we need to build local ownership and means of self-expression. We have realized that women are poor as they are unequal in power relations due to patriarchy and gender inequality; that Dalits are poor due to caste-based social discrimination; that members of ethnic groups are often poor as their culture and practices were never mainstreamed with the Hindu religion of the national majority; that Madhesis and people from the Far Western region are poor due to their geographical distance from the focus of development. In this social maze, such people were deprived of a voice and a dignified life. Development efforts neither reached them, nor were their experiences and needs given priority. Development decisions remained by and large in the hands of few Brahmin, Chhetri and Newar men, many of whom were only familiar with Kathmandu and its immediate surrounds. This posed a major question over the entire development effort in Nepal.

Recognizing this situation, HELNETAS took the opportunity to integrate social dimensions into development work, shifting from an output to outcome approach, and engaging in the root cause of poverty. We do not simply build trail bridges; we plan and construct them with local people to improve their access to health,

education, markets and most importantly to engage with central government planning processes. We prioritize women's engagement in agriculture by addressing their excessive work burden in gender stereotypical roles such as unpaid care. We envision women not only as mothers and wives in the domestic sphere, but as entrepreneurs and leaders in public life. Dalits, once regarded as untouchables, are key contributors in our development effort, whose voices are heard in leading action. Fueled by the Untouchability Act, their participation in different decision making committees is no longer rare. We have supported them in such a way that they have not only realized their rights but have also become conscious of their important role in changing discriminatory attitudes. Our focus on the disadvantaged Western cluster of Nepal has given a new hope to the people there. Through their participation in periodic village development planning processes, water management committees, forest users groups, women's groups, Dalit's groups and the different respective networks of such groups, their aspirations have also become national aspirations. Thus, our efforts are not merely channeled towards general development, but towards development with adjectives: **inclusive economic** development, **gender sensitive** development, and - most importantly - **equitable** development at local and national level. This has become our mantra.

Our organization's constructive and critical engagement with government and the people gives us the ground to continue our facilitating role in the coming years. Nepal's people have become politically aware, and conscious of their rights; they have started taking charge of their future. With our technical knowledge and experience in promoting inclusive dialogue, we can bridge the gap between the government and citizens – helping to curb underlying corruption, and promoting an effective and just role of the private sector. This will also help in engaging those citizens who have migrated outside Nepal in the hope of a better life.

What does this mean for HELVETAS' future in Nepal? What we need at the moment is to revive and rebuild the strength in people and community actions, and to support the government's efforts towards holistic, inclusive development. We need concentrated efforts under which the value of each agency is understood and rightly mobilized. We need to work together, also with our funding partners, in a manner that ensures the intersectionality of each agenda. We need action generated by local people through their own understanding and awareness, rather than adapted from outside development formulas. We need to join hands for the economic development of the country, whilst also understanding the geo-politics of our neighbouring countries. We need to support and strengthen government bodies in being accountable to the people at the same time as the people demanding their engagement in this process. We need to take a facilitating role for an effective use of development aid. There is no longer any other option for a strong and stable government.

With our applied knowledge from 60 years of experiences, our excellent linkages from local community to global level, our good relations with different actors in the government, civil society, and private sector as well as with our funding partners – most especially with SDC, with which we share basic values. Most importantly, our staff have a rich diversity of skills and capacity. All this underlies the clear contribution that we can make towards Nepal's equitable development. With the support and solidarity of global ambassadors of our work and especially within Switzerland, we engage and support bottom-up initiatives, bringing the voices of all citizens into the reconstruction of the nation. Let us tap on the twinkling strength in each individual to form a powerful constellation.

The path has been set, the road is clear and we have already taken many steps forward. So, walk with us, hand in hand with matching stride and let us reach our destination together. Thank you.