European Union tackles food insecurity in Nepal

The EU Food Facility as a response to Nepal’s food security and nutrition needs

Agriculture is a major sector of Nepal’s economy, providing a livelihood for three-quarters of the population. Nepal ranks 138th on the 2010 Human Development Index, with an estimated 31 percent of the population living below the national poverty line and around 3.5 million Nepalese people at risk of moderate to severe food insecurity. The magnitude and depth of food insecurity disproportionately affects the mountain regions followed by the hills and remote areas.

Food security has a direct effect on health and nutrition. Food insecurity in Nepal is directly linked to low agricultural productivity, which is the result of a lack of technology and research resulting in ineffective and inadequate farming practices, the unavailability of quality agricultural inputs (seeds and fertilisers), poor infrastructure including inadequate irrigation facilities and a lack of access to markets. Other contributing factors include the effects of climate change, which negatively impact on the availability of land, high food prices, limited capacity to manage food stocks, a protracted peace process and political instability. Nepal needs a solid policy framework that will enable the government together with donors and development practitioners to address these issues.

After the unprecedented global food crisis of 2007-2008, the European Union (EU) responded massively with a €1 billion Food Facility (EFF) to boost agricultural production and facilitate access to food in 50 countries most affected by volatile prices. In Nepal, €23.5 million were allocated to the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), the United Nations World Food programme (WFP) and four international NGOs namely Oxfam GB, Practical Action, DanChurchAid and Save the Children and their local implementing partners. The EFF projects have been implemented in the Mid and Far Western regions of Nepal. Support has been provided to 228,000 households in 18 food deficit districts focusing on: productive safety nets; quick impact measures through the delivery of agricultural inputs and livestock; improved sustainable agricultural practices through extension services and capacity building; improved access to land and water resources through land leasing agreements (whenever feasible) and micro-irrigation schemes. Another important component of the EFF has been the development of a food security monitoring system that will be transferred to the Government of Nepal.

The EU is highly devoted to improving agriculture, nutrition and rural development in Nepal. Together with its EFF partners, the EU is committed to reaching the most vulnerable, food insecure segments of the population. This Newsletter is dedicated to the work of the six partners that have been engaged with the EU Delegation in Nepal in the implementation of the EFF. It aims to provide some insights into the various activities implemented, as well as some of the main lessons learned. Building on the achievements and lessons learned from the EFF, the EU remains committed to improving nutrition and food security (please see our “Way Forward” article).
EU Ambassador visits EUFF projects in Mid and Far Western Regions

Ambassador Spachis, Head of the EU Delegation to Nepal, made two separate project monitoring visits to observe EUFF activities in Mugu and Kailali districts. From 10 to 15 April 2011, the Ambassador visited EU-funded interventions in Mugu that are being implemented by the World Food Programme (WFP) and Save the Children. He was accompanied by the WFP Country Director, Mrs. Nicole Menage, and by a team of food security experts from WFP and Save the Children.

The Save the Children /EUFF Food Security Initiative aims to increase food production and incomes, as well as to improve nutrition for children and families. 6,600 targeted households have benefited from the project’s activities in five districts in Mid Western Nepal that are among the most highly food insecure. In order to reduce the vulnerability of targeted families, the project has undertaken various activities, including: establishment of village food banks; provision of cash for work on land, irrigation and agricultural infrastructure improvement projects; capacity/governance training and coaching for vulnerable groups; promotion of commercial vegetable and spice production; development of kitchen gardening and nutrition education; establishment of vegetable collection centres and support to their operations through Marketing and Planning Committees; off farm vocational training delivery and support to the establishment of micro-enterprises by vulnerable groups.

The WFP programme has tried to mitigate the effects of volatile food prices and to prevent seasonal hunger of ultra-poor agricultural households, including those of the poorest women-headed households, while investing in infrastructure and livelihood enhancement measures. Project activities have focused on providing timely access to appropriate quantity and quality of food through a food or cash for assets modality. While doing so, the project has concentrated on the creation or rehabilitation of critical infrastructure and community assets, including micro-irrigation and water management schemes, access roads, bridges, trails, etc. with a view to restoring or improving agriculture capacity, market access, and livelihood opportunities. The project has also supported the development of the so-called Nepal Food Security Monitoring Systems (better known as the NeK SAP) and its transfer to the Government of Nepal while strengthening the capacity of the Ministry of Agriculture and Cooperatives (MoAC) to monitor and analyse food security.

The second field mission took place in Kailali from 10-12 May 2011, and was organised by the Food and Agricultural Organisation (FAO) and DanChurchAid (DCA) to observe their EUFF activities in the district. Dr. Spachis was accompanied by a diverse team of experts from the FAO and DCA and from their local implementing partners, the Nepal National Dalit Social Welfare Organisation (NNDSWO) and the Forum for Awareness and Youth Activity (FAYA).

The FAO project aims to enhance the food security of 114,410 targeted vulnerable farming households in ten districts and to mitigate the effects of soaring food prices through the provision of improved seeds and technical training to small landholders farmers. The project has resulted in: 1) increased staple food due to improved crops yields as a result of the provision of agriculture inputs including fertilisers and quality seeds of improved varieties; 2) improved technical capacities and practices of farmers, agricultural cooperatives and relevant government staff through the provision of capacity-building training and extension services; 3) support the WFP in strengthening the capacity of the Ministry of Agriculture and Cooperatives (MoAC) to monitor and analyse food security.

The DanChurchAid project aims to increase agriculture productivity of small landholder Dalit farmers through: 1) improved and diversified agricultural techniques and evidence based best practices; livestock and agro-based initiatives for increased income to mitigate the negative effects of rising food prices; 3) increased effectiveness of the safety net programmes of the Government and International Organizations in terms of improved access to food for vulnerable and landless Dalit communities.

EU team visiting the Samjhana Farmers’ Group during a field mission in Dhangadhi, Kailali district in May 2011.
EU Food Facility Workshops

FAO Exit Strategy Workshop

On April 21st and 22nd the FAO organised a two-day workshop to reflect on the project’s achievements and to identify lessons learned as well as the way forward. The workshop was attended by more than 100 participants, including high-level government officials and representatives of development partners and donors. The EU Ambassador and Head of Delegation, the FAO Representative in Nepal, and the Director General of the Department of Agriculture were present as Chief guests. Several recommendations were formulated. The recommendations included the need to improve seed multiplication and distribution systems, and to scale up the System of Rice Intensification and True Potato Seeds technology transfers through partnerships with other (non) governmental agencies. Further requirements are the strengthening of veterinary services at community level alongside the provision of integrated support such as livestock fodder and shed management training. In addition, a livestock curriculum should be developed and delivered using the farmers’ field school (FFS) approach; the institutionalisation of existing FFS would be beneficial. Farmers’ Groups should be gradually converted into cooperatives. Improvements in crop monitoring and assessment systems are critically needed.

Nutrition Workshop

In view of the persistence and scope of undernutrition in Nepal and given the current donor interest in addressing nutrition concerns, the EU Delegation and the EU-funded Nutrition Advisory Service (NAS) organised a two-day nutrition workshop for the EUFF partners in Kathmandu on 3 and 4 May 2011. The objectives of the event were to (1) analyse and reach a common understanding of the multiple causes of food and nutrition insecurity in Nepal and of their consequences; (2) on the basis of the causality models of malnutrition to review the EUFF activities from a nutrition perspective to reflect on their nutritional impact and (3) to identify and discuss specific approaches that could have been used to better capitalize on agriculture to achieve nutrition outcomes.

A consensus was reached among the participants that in order for food security interventions to have an impact on nutrition:

- The causes of undernutrition at the local level need to be properly understood;
- Nutrition-specific objectives need to be incorporated in the design of projects;
- Those who are the most vulnerable to malnutrition (women and children) be targeted;
- Year-round access to diversified food must be improved on the basis of local resources and capacities;
- Synergies between relevant sectors (e.g. education, agriculture, health, social protection) should be developed to optimize impact and resource utilization;
- The impact of food security programmes on household access to dietary diversity and food consumption be measured by using the individual dietary diversity score;
- Women must be involved and adequately supported in recognition of their critical roles in food production, income generation, food preparation and child/family care at the household level while being concerned about their workloads.

EUFF Project brings hope for communities in flood affected Kailali

Rice farming is not viable for farmers in Kailali district whose land is always inundated by yearly floods. The flood follows the monsoon and jeopardizes standing crops, reducing yield if not destroying the harvest entirely. The monsoon peaks by the end of July or August, bringing heavy rain in a short time span, at the time when the rice crop is almost ready to be harvested. Households cope by reducing food consumption, leaving the family hungry and nutrient deficient.

Mr. Ram Bahadur Saud, a farmer in Lalbojhi VDC, explains that he is lucky if he is able to harvest rice three times every five years. Nothing can be done to control or avoid the flood, he says. He simply accepts this reality. This situation has placed him and his communities in a poverty trap with little hope. Last year, he received 10 kg of improved rice seeds and 32 kg of complex fertilizers from FAO. He was fortunate to be able to harvest the crop because the flood inundated his field just for a few days only, but hundreds of farmers in nearby VDCs were not so fortunate.

Understanding this situation, FAO, through its implementing partner FAYA in the EU Food Facility (EUFF) Programme, attempted to address this problem. The problem was discussed in the meeting of the District Project Coordination Committee (DPCC) consisting of FAO, WFP, NGOs, district administrators and led by the District Agriculture Development Office (DADO). It was agreed to conduct a Farmers Field School with a 2000 – 2500 square meter demonstration plot. The System of Rice Intensification (SRI) was introduced and the rice was planted two months earlier than the normal planting season, so that the rice could be harvested before the flood.

Given positive feedback from Farmers’ Field School last year, the SRI was an appropriate technology to introduce because it could bring higher yields with less seed and water inputs. Special planting, water management, and transplantation techniques are taught in the Farmers’ School which improve growing conditions for the rice, and achieve proven yield increases. The dry and wet alternating condition in SRI technology reduces the need for irrigation water and is estimated to reduce
the irrigation cost by 40 to 50 percent. With an average yield of more than 7 tons per hectare from SRI last year, a farming household of 5 persons with a small land holding of 1500 square meters was able to feed its family for one year.

Despite requiring Kailali farmers to plant earlier, acceptance was very high. Following the field school, many of the farmers took the initiative to grow early rice with SRI technology in their own fields. Mr. Laiku Khatharia, from Lalbojhi VDC, is one of 463 SRI farmers who is growing early rice, cultivating on his 2,300 square meter plot of land. His crop is now at the panicle initiation stage and each plant has 40 to 45 tillers. He expressed surprise that a single plant can produce so many tillers, as he said normal practices produced only a maximum of 8 to 10 tillers. Everyday, people from nearby villages come to see his rice field and ask about the technology. So far, early rice has been planted on approximately 85 hectares that are expected to be harvested by mid-July. From early observation of the number of tillers, farmers are expecting a significant yield increase this year.

The introduction of SRI and the effort to change the planting calendar is not without difficulties. Early planting represents a change from normal practices. The dry and wet alternating condition has stimulated the growing of weeds. Farmers complained early on, because they had to weed fields three times with SRI technology rather than only once using conventional practices. To address this, FAO equipped the farmers with rotary weeder to accelerate and ease the weeding process. Such weeder are ineffective with conventional practices because of irregular planting distances, a problem made absent through SRI technology. When we asked farmers to calculate the time for weeding, SRI technology required less time but more frequency.

Case Studies

Helping to Enhance Local Productivity for Food Security

Doti District is a very remote district in far Western Nepal where the land is less fertile and social structures have remained traditional. Khima Devi Sarki, a 25-year-old single mother, has been facing a lot of difficulties to meet the basic needs of her family. She owns a small land that barely provides her with sufficient leaves and grass for livestock fodder. When the EU/Practical Action Food Facility Project was implemented, she participated together with other beneficiaries in the construction of an irrigation canal and received NPR 9,000 (689) as wage following the “cash for work” scheme adopted by the project. With this money she provides food security for 7 or 8 months to her family.

As part of the project, she was also trained on vegetables cultivation and received improved seed of rice, maize and other vegetables. Today, with quality rice seeds for plantation and improved availability of water for irrigation, her rice yield has doubled. Part of her production is now consumed by the household, with the remaining being sold in the local market. Last summer season alone, she earned more than Rs.20,000 from selling summer vegetables, such as chili, okra, cucumber, eggplant and green beans. With this income she will now be able to pay for basic household and school education expenditures for her daughters.

The EU Ambassador, Dr. Alexander Spachis, who visited Lalbojhi VDC on May 11, 2011, called for the scaling up and continuation of a productivity enhancing technology such as the SRI. The EUFF Programme has generated momentum, which needs to be backed by the Government afterwards. Mr. Ram Naresh Sharma, chief of DADO in Kailali, has been a proponent of the new program to introduce early rice and SRI. However, the budget allocated from the Department of Agriculture remains very limited and restricts the capacity to continue this project. With continued support, this initiative will directly address the food security problems in this district by boosting rice production, while mitigating the perpetual risks associated with floods.

The early cultivation of rice transforms the monsoon from a danger into an asset, bringing hope to thousands of farmers in Kailali District. To date, the initiative has achieved promising results, but concrete success in stabilizing the food security situation and strengthening resilience may require some time and continued assistance.
Technical farming skills for off-seasonal vegetable production

Mahendra Malla, a 50-year-old smallholder farmer living with his wife and four children in Dailekh district, is one of the beneficiaries of the EUF Oxfam project. In the past Mr. Malla was only able to cultivate maize and wheat on his rainfed and degraded farmland. His food production based on the use of traditional farming practices and local seeds was sufficient to feed his family for only three months a year.

Since he became involved in the EUF Oxfam as a member of the Community Management Committee (CMC) in January 2010, Mr. Malla has benefited from various training activities that have helped to improve his technical farming skills for off-seasonal vegetable production. The community as a whole has additionally benefited from a newly constructed micro-irrigation system that has helped improve the cultivation of vegetables and grains. As a result, he has successfully moved from subsistence farming to commercial production of high value vegetable and cash-crops, and is now able to feed his family all year round.

The Practical Action project supported by the EUF is aiming to improve farm productivity of 10,000 households owning less than 0.3 hectares of land. The projects through increased access to agriculture technology, inputs, infrastructure and services in Dailekh, Kalikot and Doti Districts.

Lessons learned from the EU Food Facility

The EU Delegation has emphasised the need for the EUF partners to document lessons learned and identify best practices from the implementation of the programme. This effort culminated with the organisation of a “Lessons Learning Workshop” in Nepalgunj on 2 February 2011. This workshop enabled the EUF partners to exchange experience-based knowledge of successful modalities and technologies, to share best practices, as well as some of the greatest challenges and constraints encountered during project implementation. It yielded a wealth of findings that are partially summarized below:

- **Technologies**: The EUF partners introduced farmers to many different types of technologies that were found to be effective for increasing smallholder incomes and agricultural productivity, including for example: recommended crop varieties; micro irrigation technologies to conserve water and increase yields; improved livestock; use of plastic houses for off season vegetables; bio and organic fertilizers;

- **Infrastructure**: The partners found that investments in small scale infrastructure increased food security. Examples are: developing and rehabilitating small surface irrigation systems; piped irrigation systems; marketing infrastructure; rustic stores; and agricultural access roads.

- **Approaches**: There is strong consensus on the effectiveness of a number of approaches, including: leasehold farming for landless households; the value chain approach, including establishing local private service providers and rural collection centres; cash and food for work programs for social safety nets; and health and nutrition training to improve family utilisation of food and therefore nutrition.

- **Institutional**: The EUF partners agreed that it is very important to collaborate closely with the government for sustainability, sharing resources and capacities for common goals, and to enable food insecure households to access government services. Empowerment of farmers is an important cross cutting approach to mobilize and motivate farmers to take up new technologies and access the government services. Empowerment is especially important for women and disadvantaged social groups, both because of their poor access to services and because they are often the most food insecure. Farmers were empowered through the development of local farmer institutions such as: farmer groups; infrastructure user groups; savings and credit groups; cooperatives; marketing and planning committees; and other organizations to mobilize resources and articulate farmer needs to government and projects.

- **Constraints**: The partners identified a number of constraints and coping strategies. Important constraints include: lack of access to quality seed; fertilizer/ inputs; credit; and knowledge. Also the short-term planning time horizon of food insecure households, due to their dependence on daily wages, inhibits them from investing time and resources in agriculture.

These findings were presented to the Government of Nepal and to the development and donor communities on June 30, in an attempt to mobilise relevant national and international stakeholders and to invite them to follow up on the promising results achieved by the EUF towards increased wider impact and long-term sustainability.
The Way Forward

Building on the achievements and lessons learned from the Food Facility the EU will provide continued support to several ongoing projects, as well as to new initiatives that are about to be launched:

1. Under the Food Security Thematic Programme (FSTP), Caritas launched a new regional project on 24th June, entitled “Building Resilience to Climate Change through Strengthening Adaptive Small Scale Farming Systems in Rainfed Areas in Bangladesh, India and Nepal (SAF-BIN)”. The project aims at promoting local food and nutritional security by building resilience among Small Holder Farmers to cope with the changing weather patterns and their adverse impacts on agriculture, through the identification of more friendly and enduring farming techniques. The project has an overall duration of 60 months and a total regional budget of €3 million, of which €600,000 is for Nepal. The project, which is part of the European Union’s “Global Programme on Agriculture Research for Development”, is expected to benefit around 1,000 small farmer households in the mid-hills of Kaski, Chure hills of Nawalparasi and the plains of Bardiya.

2. The EU will provide additional support to the Ministry of Agriculture and Cooperatives (MoAC) in partnership with the World Food Programme to follow up on what both agencies have achieved under the EU Food Facility, and to finalise the ongoing transfer to the Government of Nepal (GoN) of the Nepal Food Security Monitoring Systems (NeKSAp). The project will start in autumn and will have an overall duration of 4 years and a total budget of €4 million. It is expected that by the time the project ends, the GoN will be fully capable to monitor and analyse the food security status throughout the country.

3. Also under the FSTP an EU contribution of €20 million, including €3.2 million for Nepal, has been granted to UNICEF under the regional project “Maternal and Young Child Nutrition Security in Asia”. The project is expected to support a comprehensive package of measures to prevent and address malnutrition in 5 South Asian countries where pervasive child and maternal under-nutrition remain persistently and alarmingly high. The EU considers it crucial to start “doing business as unusual”, i.e. to move beyond the usual health sector responses and to tackle undernutrition through multiple sectors, including notably agriculture and food security, and across different levels of causality to address the underlying causes of undernutrition.

4. In addition, the EU is finalising the evaluation of a €19 million call for proposals on “Technology Transfer for Food Security”. The selected projects are expected to introduce and facilitate the adoption of productive and environmentally sustainable agricultural technologies that have the potential to contribute to improving the livelihood of the most vulnerable smallholder households in South and South-East Asia. A €4 million project involving Nepal has been accepted. It was submitted by a consortium of international NGOs, including International Development Enterprises (IDE) and Save the Children, which will therefore have a chance to follow up on their EUFF project under this new intervention.

5. The EU is also working on the design of a regional cooperation programme to support the conservation of the Himalaya ecosystems and rural livelihood development in the context of climate change. The programme is likely to introduce pilot projects that will help demonstrate technical options for the rehabilitation of degraded lands and forests, as well as to improve incomes and livelihood and the sustainable management of natural resources.

6. Furthermore, the EU Delegation is contributing to the development of Nepal’s Agriculture Development Strategy - under the leadership of the MoAC and with the support of the Asian Development Bank and other donors - by providing expert support in the irrigation sector. By doing so, the EU wishes to pursue a close policy dialogue with the GoN on rural development, agriculture and food security-related issues.

Food security, rural development and nutrition are comparatively new sectors of intervention for the EU in Nepal. It was, therefore, of critical importance for the EU Delegation to learn as much as possible from the implementation of the EUFF. This will allow us to engage ourselves in these sectors on a longer-term basis through well-targeted interventions in close partnership with the GoN and other relevant stakeholders.
Photos from the Field

Woman planting rice (copyright: James Giambrone, WFP)

A woman winnowing wheat in preparation of making flour (copyright: Cristina Gomez Dubois)

Farmer households in Dolpa (copyright: James Giambrone, WFP)

United Nations World Food Programme beneficiaries in Mid-Western Nepal (copyright: James Giambrone, WFP)

A farmer working in his field in Banke Village Development Community (VDC), Doti District, Far Western Region (copyright: Sumit Dayal)

Micronutrient education project in Mugu (copyright: James Giambrone, WFP)

World Food Programme staff instructing a beneficiary in Mugu (copyright: James Giambrone, WFP)

A contract farming project funded under the EUFF and implemented by FEDD and DCA in Doti District, Far Western Region (copyright: Sumit Dayal)
The European Commission in Brussels has launched global calls for proposals for funding under its European Instrument for Democracy and Human Rights (EIDHR) programme and also under the Non-Stats Actors in Development and Local Authorities (NSA/LA) framework.


Deadlines for the submission of concept note for EIDHR Calls are 1 August 2011 and the NSA/LA call deadline is 15 September 2011.

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