

The Hare or the Tortoise,
who had the right tactics to sustain?

A story from the District Roads Support Programme in Nepal

Submitted for the SDC – Award: ‘Stories about Sustainability’

The Hare or the Tortoise, who had the right tactics to sustain?

I start this story with a feeling of exhilaration, of achievement, and I want to share it. I think it might surprise you, I know it surprised me. I'm sitting watching as my first crop of potatoes is being loaded up on a lorry. My son is organising the activity, giving instructions and laughing with the truck driver as he does so. I reflect how different his life will be to mine. How the opportunities now available to him as a business man down in town were only dreams for our family just three short years ago. But I'm ahead of myself and I want to tell this story right from the beginning.....

My name is Naresh Tamang and I live in Lisanku village in the Dolakha district of Nepal. Back then, Kamala my wife used to stay at home looking after our five children and working on the farm. We're high up in Lisanku and it's good potato growing country, so my family and I worked hard tending our crops. We always had more potatoes than we needed. My neighbours didn't want to buy them, because they grew their own. So we had to try and sell them up in Mude, but they were so heavy to carry that by the time I had paid the porters there was no profit in going to market. What we needed was a road, one that could take lorries and then I would be able to transport my potatoes to town to sell. Yes a road would make a lot of difference to us all.



Sometimes I believed Kamala could hear my thoughts. As I lingered over my tea, she sat down to join me and quietly started to talk. She told me of my cousin Ram who lived over the pass in the next valley. Told me how his village had just had a road built. An impressive, wide road with buses and lorries leading all the way down to the black top highway just a few kilometres from Kirne. As she talked I peered in the direction where Ram lived, hoping to see their new road and verify what Kamala was telling me. But it was too far away.

"We'll go and see him." I said. "Tomorrow, all of us together."

So early the next morning we set off to see Ram to hear all about the new road.

"It was so quick; nobody in the village knew much about it until the bulldozer arrived," said Ram's wife.

Ram continued, "They just ploughed through the hillside in a straight line. We didn't know which way they were going to go, but those clever district officials must have known what they were doing, because look, here it is."

Ram triumphantly gestured behind him at the dominant new feature in the hillside, cutting boldly through everything in its path, earth carelessly discarded in piles at its edge. A bus was taking excited villagers down to town and parked up by the edge of a field was a lorry being loaded with sacks of vegetables, obviously headed for market in Kirne.



As we walked home that night, my mind struggled to understand how it could be that life had changed so quickly and easily for my cousin. I was envious of Ram, but I tried to forget about roads and get on with life. There was always plenty to do on the farm.

However, only a few weeks later some men came from the district centre and asked us whether we thought we needed a road. That wasn't a difficult question to answer! But we had to tell them why we wanted the road and where we thought it should go. They told us that the villages which needed a road most, would get one first.

It caused a buzz in the village; the idea of a road was big news. Around the water tap, with soap in their hair and struggling to wash their children, I heard the women chatter.

“My son could go to middle school” said one.

“And we could get to the hospital and the market” said another.

“I’d like it because people would come up and see us on the bus”.

The talk was excited and happy and I hoped our village wasn’t going to be disappointed. I wondered if we would ever really get the road.

It seemed there might be a chance though, because a while later old Mr Thapa returning from the district centre brought the news that our road had been approved. So we sat and waited for the bulldozer.

But it didn’t come; instead we got lots of clean-clothed people, a technical team and others calling themselves social mobilisers. “Hatter”, could they talk!, and to everybody. They wanted to know where everyone lived and who owned the land. They asked for our ideas on where the road should go and really listened to our answers! They got all the women together for a meeting, not a man allowed into the group, so we all hung around pretending not to be interested then interrogated our wives when they got home.



“Equal work, equal payment” was all Kamala could say. “I’m going to build this road too,” she said and I noticed a proudness in the angle of her jaw, a confidence that hadn’t been there a couple of hours before. What was happening?

Well whatever it was, it was happening under the big Pipal tree, the entire village were there. I’d never seen the like before, all the children and women sitting in the best seats.

I pushed my way to the front and loudly shouted, “Where’s the bulldozer then?”

And that’s when they told us. There wasn’t going to be a bulldozer! What a shock, but worse than that, we were going to build the road ourselves! “Now how can that be right?” I thought. “How can simple picks and shovels and human hard work ever challenge the power of a bulldozer? How could all this talking, planning and getting us involved be a more successful method of getting the road built?” It was like racing a tortoise against a hare. My cousin had the bulldozing hare and his village got their road in just a few months. We were stuck with the plodding tortoise and having to build the road all by ourselves, and what’s more it would take three years! Still, it was nice being involved in planning what was going to happen, and the thought of a secure income over three years was really good.

They asked us to choose people to be on the committee, well now I understand it was the Local Road Users Committee, but I didn’t know much about things then. Still, I was pleased my friends and neighbours chose me, but they chose Mrs Shrestha, my friend Tek’s wife too! Our new committee was going to be trusted with all the money. These district people were going to train us how to organise all the labourers and pay them for their work. I couldn’t help thinking that we should get started though. I could see Ram’s hare far ahead laughing back at our tortoise still stuck on the start line. So slowly the work began. The district people certainly put a lot of time and effort into sorting out who needed the jobs the most. For example, Lal Gurung and his brother were in one of the road building groups and I knew they never had enough food and didn’t have

the money to send their children to school. It took some time to get our working groups running properly, but the local people who were trained by the social mobiliser team helped a lot. We began to see some progress and the road started to take shape.

Things changed at home, my sons started to help their sister with the household chores because their mother was busy at work all day. I made sure Kamala ate more food to give her the energy to swing her pick and I decided it was only fair if I did my share of looking after the children too. It wasn't just the family either, the whole village seemed to be pulling together and working as a team. I'd never spent so much time with my neighbours. The barriers that kept us apart before seemed to be falling away. The engineers from the district were interested in our ideas and helped us with the technical side of the job.



We had some problems because many of the road workers couldn't count or understand about the money they were getting paid. Everything had to be fair and out in the open, so the reading and writing classes in the evenings really helped. You see, Lal Gurung and the others like him all learnt their numbers and how to write their names. Then they understood when we were measuring how much road their group had built and knew they weren't being cheated.

When the first money came home, I wanted to splash out and buy some new things, but oh no, Kamala had been listening to the social mobiliser lady and wanted to save what we didn't need. One of Kamala's friends was on the committee that ran a savings and credit scheme and they managed to get everybody to save some of their wages each month.

There was another good idea for when someone had an accident at work. We all decided that we should help pay towards the doctor and hospital costs. I didn't mind because supposing Kamala broke her arm, it would use up all the money she'd earned if we had to pay for the treatment ourselves. So each time everyone was paid, they put a small amount into the emergency fund, which we on the committee kept in case anyone did have an accident.



I don't think our tortoise was speeding up; in fact he wasn't because it was going to take three years to finish our road, but somehow he wasn't leaving anybody behind. It felt good and we began to feel like the road was really ours.

Our first year went by and we were beginning to enjoy the benefits of our nice new track that led all the way up to Mude. When we walked to town we chatted to people from our neighbouring villages and it was quite exciting to realise they were all working on the road in the same way as us.

The rain came and we had to stop the building, but it's funny how the activities didn't stop. The ideas kept coming to the village from the social mobiliser and the people from our village that she'd trained to help teach us. We learnt how to stop the children getting sick and what to do when someone was ill. We all had to think about what we could make to sell up in Mude now that it was going to be easy to get there. Life suddenly seemed to open up. People who had only been to town a few times in their life were considering growing extra vegetables or making roof tiles specifically to sell in Mude on a regular basis!

Sometimes we had setbacks; for example, the track was closed by a landslide that first monsoon, up near the stream. A farmer had been tilling the land too close to the road and the rainwater had weakened the earth, making it slide down, destroying all our work. What was good though, was that after the monsoon when we started work, we got paid to build the road again. We told the farmer of his mistake and he agreed not to grow crops too close to the road.



It was about this time that we visited Ram again. His daughter was getting married and we had all been invited to the wedding. We enjoyed a great family celebration, but the news about their road was not good. They'd had a wash-out next to the river and there were big mudslides on three sections. Because they hadn't thought about the drainage, the road surface was really muddy and the lorries weren't coming in case they got stuck. When we asked if the bulldozer was coming back to fix it, nobody seemed to know what was happening. We asked who was in charge and began to realise that no one in the village had much control over how the road was built. Ram said that he knew the road had been put far too close to the steep hillside and so he wasn't a bit surprised when the mudslides had come down and closed the road.



"Why didn't you tell the road builders," I asked puzzled.

He replied, "They didn't listen to us, they didn't think we were clever enough to give them any advice. In fact they hardly talked to anyone in the village. We just had to wait and see what happened and where they built the road."

When we left that afternoon my mind slipped back to thinking about my childhood and listening to my father telling stories in the darkness before bedtime. It's strange how I had forgotten till now, but in the race between the hare and the tortoise, the hare was

so far ahead that he thought he couldn't possibly lose. He decided to lie down and rest for a while, but in his overconfidence, he fell asleep. He hadn't judged his opposition correctly, because as he slept the tortoise plodded on, slowly, surely, gaining ground, quietly confident of his ultimate and enduring success. It seemed to me that Ram's hare had definitely fallen asleep.

It was with renewed confidence that we returned to the job of widening our track. At times we had to learn quite complicated things, like how to build walls to support the road. Sometimes we used our traditional dry stone walls, but if the wall needed to be higher we had to use wire cages to hold the stones in, they looked strange but seemed to work. There always seemed to be helpful people around showing us how to do it and we learned such a lot from the engineers. Time passed quickly over the next two years as our road progressed.

Then suddenly the road was finished. Everybody's first thought was how to keep it in good condition; we'd put such a lot of effort into building the road that we didn't want to lose it. So we held our own meetings and planned together how we would collect taxes from the vehicles using our road. The money we raised we used to employ road maintenance workers from our village. It was their job to look after the road, and we made sure they did it properly.



Life in the village had changed. At village meetings people listened with more respect to whoever wanted to say something, even the children. We decided to build new pit latrines and continue saving as a group for other projects in the future. One great system we had was called 'passing on the gift'. Some people without any animals were given a female goat, so long as they promised to give its first female baby away to someone who really needed it. So all of a sudden, people were not only enjoying the new animals, but they were thinking about helping others too. Simple things, like seeing the children brush their teeth properly and watching Lal Gurung's children go to school, made me realise that we had come a long way. We hadn't just built a road; we had improved our whole lifestyle. Our tortoise had well and truly crossed the finish line and well ahead of the hare. Despite Ram's best efforts his village never managed to get the bulldozer to return.



.....So sitting here now watching my potatoes being loaded up for their journey to market, I can look back with pride at what our village has achieved. Our road emerges unscathed from the monsoon rain and is motorable for eight months of the year. The economic activity in the village is plentiful and diverse, from potatoes to goats and bee-keeping to fruit trees, but perhaps the best difference is the change in all of us. We have a sense of control over our lives, which came through building the road. We've learnt so many skills that are helping us to make a different and improved future for our children. When I'm asked to explain it all, I

can't find a better way than to tell the tale of the tortoise and the hare. In the darkness at bedtime, I think my children can understand more deeply the importance of endurance and making differences that will last.

Sustainability – what's that? All I know is that I'd choose a tortoise over a hare every time!

This story is taken from a local person who worked on an SDC funded roads programme in Nepal. The District Roads Support Programme is designed to support decentralisation within the districts of Nepal, by building the capacity of the district organisation and the local people, to maintain, rehabilitate and construct district roads.