

# Group of helping hands Nepal / Surendra Shrestha

**Surendra Shrestha**, Executive Director of SAHAS, discussed the challenges faced by Nepali farmers, including lack of irrigation, poor seed quality, and climate change impacts. He emphasized the importance of community-based organizations (CBOs) in addressing these issues, highlighting their role in accessing resources, developing leadership, and fostering social capital. Fish farming initiatives, supported by CBOs, provide economic benefits, environmental sustainability, and fresh fish for local communities. Surendra's dedication to improving agricultural practices and community well-being is rooted in his agricultural background and personal experiences.

## **SPEAKERS**

Surendra Shrestha, Christy Kauffman

### **Surendra Shrestha**

So they learn to work together. When we are working with marginalized community, they come together to work together. We need to increase that kind of social capital. They support each other they trust each other

### **Christy Kauffman**

*That is Surendra Shrestha, talking about community-based organizations that MCC partner, Group of helping hands Nepal or SAHAS, is helping to establish in farming communities in Nepal.*

*I am Christy Kauffman and you are listening to relief development and podcast, a production of Mennonite Central Committee.*

*To start out this episode I wanted to take some time to talk a bit about MCC's partner model. This is helpful I think when we talk to our partner Sahas in the episode about how they do their work. MCC empowers our partners to meet local needs and build peace, knowing their insight and leadership are key to effective solutions that last. Local partners allow for lasting impact.*

*When MCC works with partners, we often are what they would call a "funding partner" an organization that is funding a project that a local partner is implementing. MCC provides resources, capacity building and funding to local organizations that are then seeing the work through in the community. Our partners then are local people implementing the projects. This local implementation is a sustainable development model that is the base of all the work that MCC does.*

*Sahas is a partner organization that MCC works with in Nepal that has a similar strategy in how they do their work. The full name of the partner organization gives some insight into their strategy for this work. The name "group of helping hands Nepal" they in rural farming communities to establish what they call*

*CBO's or community-based organizations. So basically a group of helping hands. It's a group of community members that come together and work together to improve their communities in many different ways. These CBO's are central to how SAHAS works sustainably in helping communities accessing resources, developing leadership, and fostering social capital.*

**Christy Kauffman**

So today on the show, I have with me the executive director of one of Mennonite Central committee's partners, SAHAS. Surendra, yeah, would you introduce yourself?

**Surendra Shrestha**

My name is Surendra Kumar Shrestha. I'm executive director. I'm founder of this organization. My family background is from farming background. My parents were farmers. I have been grown up in a village called Dioradi. I went to study agriculture because I learned from my parents, my brother and sister in farming, and they also encouraged me to go to study agriculture.

**Christy Kauffman**

And what did studying agriculture lead to, for you?

**Surendra Shrestha**

my parents told me how difficult livelihood to raise. You know, 11 children in the family, and I also see how the community members or my relatives have a hardship for their livelihood. So agriculture is very important in our life. More than 65% population are depend on agriculture. I can go to university and learn new skill and knowledge, so that I can also transfer to other farming families, so that they can also increase their products and productivity, so that they can secure their food and nutrition.

**Christy Kauffman**

What are some of the challenges that farmers have in Nepal? You come from a farming background. That means you've been around farmers your whole life.

**Surendra Shrestha**

Yeah, there are several constraints for the farmers. First, farmers, they have no irrigation facility, no quality of seeds. They cannot access resources. So there are several. Another is last couple of years, there is climate change, climate crisis. So this is also more impact to small holder farmers who have production only three months from their land. Now, because of drought, now you can see the temperature, sometimes heavy rain, unpredicted landslide. So all this impacted to smallholder farmers.

**Christy Kauffman**

Was there a moment where you saw these challenges and you decided, I want to do something about some of these challenges?

**Surendra Shrestha**

in my family, we had 11 children, my sisters and brothers, they were in the field all the time. Myself, also in my village, life was very hard. You know, at the time only depend on agriculture, go to either daily labor or grow food and vegetables on their own field.. So my dedication is, you know, I should

contribute little bit to farming families so that they can also improve their life. I go to village. I meet, you know, families. When I see they are happy, then I feel very proud and my team, I always appreciate my team, because this is in the teamwork, because I enjoy, you know, working Nepal and serving Nepali communities. I had also few opportunity to get jobs in outside, when I completed, I in my acknowledgement. I said, When I finished my study, I go to back to Nepal, because of my parents, my family, my village experience, I dedicated all these things. But it is very small thing. It is not big thing, but when we work together, funding partner community, Nepal Government, SAHAS team, then we can do you know something? Yeah,

### **Christy Kauffman**

I'm curious to know more about your motivation to come back to Nepal after maybe you had other opportunities.

### **Surendra Shrestha**

My motivation is, as I said, from my family, my village. Then when we go to village, you see how difficult their livelihood in in their village, if I was in UK. Maybe, you know, I had a good facility, I stay, but I may not enjoy, you know what I'm enjoying here, because when one family or one community see happiness changes positive way, I thought that is the big impact. Then, you know, working for others coming here, working with marginalized community to transform their life, then I feel I have a great impact here than living, you know, somewhere outside.

### **Christy Kauffman**

and I've seen a lot of that impact just this last week in visiting some of the Sahas projects in Morang district. A lot of them have to do with these community groups. Yeah,

### **Surendra Shrestha**

I would like to link little bit, you know, theory of change, Because if you come to Nepal, it is good to know little bit about social structure, because Nepal is now. It is secular country, but still it is not free. The upper caste people. They are in the high post army, bureaucracy, political if you look all political parties, all the senior leaders are upper caste. So if we leave the social structure, there is caste division, very untouchable Dalit, they treat different. They do not treat as a human. So another part is gender discrimination. Women are treated as a second class. This is one issue, all these parameters, whether any development agency go change all this structure, then there will be sustainable change. If otherwise there is no sustain for example, if you do not talk about gender discrimination in the community, if you do not talk about we are all human, we should not say you are Dalit. I am upper caste or middle class. So we need to reduce you know about that mentality. So SAHAS is more focused on changing in social structure. If our intervention does not change the social structure, then just giving, you know, material is not sustained, and that is only for project period. After three years or five years, if you go there, it does not sustain. So we need to change the social structure. So we need to provide, empower community, giving, you know, education. That is why we need to know all these hindering structure and heat on this areas. And if we include all these barrier go there, then bring the marginalized community in people's participation, empowering them, then it will be more sustained. Therefore, you mentioned this cblo community based network organization when we work with Dali women group, marginalized community, their voice are not heard by the bureaucrats and working only

10 people, 15 people, they cannot demand their rights they could not fulfill. But when we provide different kinds of training, organizational development, leadership, communication, such kind of training, as well as technical training to grow more crops, vegetables, animal for economic empowerment. So when we bringing more marginalized community into one organization, one platform, then their voice would be big, hard, and they can influence to local government. And that is how we learn the last 28 years.

**Christy Kauffman**

these groups, these community based organizations, it's not just a group of people gathering together, talking it's also a registered organization. Can you talk about that and why that's important.

**Surendra Shrestha**

The small group should be registered to access resources from government. If group is not registered, then Nepal government would not allow to give any resources. We should be accountable. We should be responsible because we already registered and this is legal things. If this is informal, sometime it can disappear very easily, or the resources can, you know, misuse easily, but once it is registered, then this is also recognition in the community. If you go to village and the group, you know, Chairperson or Vice Chairperson or secretary, she is very proud. You know, I am chairperson of this group. Then at the beginning, few groups member know her. But when they start activities, development activities, other group also know this group is active and implement different activities. Then she is proud. And you know, people come and discuss with her, then she also feel socially, you know, recognition and proud. So the registration process also important yes.

**Christy Kauffman**

we talked to a group leader who is a women's group leader and her CBO, or community based organization, which was all women was doing fish pond farming together. So we got to see them in action, actually catching the fish, and talk to her. And you can see the pride in her when we were talking to her how she appreciated the opportunity of leadership. As a woman from a marginalized community, she was a leader of this group, and she she was proud of that, and we saw that. Yeah,

**Surendra Shrestha**

that's why I said when you know one individual or family. Least happy smile. It encourages us to do more hard work, you know, more dedication. So sometimes she might not get any respect, but once the group is active in our experience, when community members become a member of CBOs, learning different trainings and exposure to now they became not only group leader, they became like vice chair of local government. You know, spokesperson of municipality, many leaders. They said, You know, I was very shy person, but I learned from group. Now I became leader. They said, I'm Vice Chair. I'm world share now I'm women representatives in this local government. So that kind of you know, leadership also developed.

**Christy Kauffman**

Yeah, it's developing leaders. There's more opportunity for leaders in these marginalized communities.

**Surendra Shrestha**

Yes, and there are other formal and informal user group, like first user group, drinking water user group, school management committee. So these CBO members, when she demonstrated leadership, she will be selected in different formal and informal committees. And that is also another proudness, and there are many advantage with this model. This is more democratic process. And this is also quite fit with the Nepal government structure. Now we have a federal system, you know, three tiers of government, and it has also three tiers. So there are many advantages. Currently, we have 37 different CBS network organizers, and this is benefit to when there is a natural disaster, when we need to immediate relief support, we can mobilize these group members because we have a local structure, local entities, such local entities also important for the mobilization during disaster or other categories.

**Christy Kauffman**

Yeah, the structure of SAHAS with their community based organizations also reminds me of MCC. Is structure of MCC with local partners, because we have local partners in many different places. So this is almost Seha has many local partners within their community based organizations. And what other activities are the community based organizations a part of?

**Surendra Shrestha**

yeah, they demand their rights and entitlement. For example, local government has different budget heading for the Dali or disabled or, you know, climate change related activities they do advocacy. Then secondly, they also submit project proposal to access resources, sometime financial, sometime material. And they also participate in local planning process, government, they suppose, they suppose to do bottom up approach like us. They go to village and collect proposal so our CVs members participate in local government planning process, and they also sometime suggest, you know, different activities, Project most important, they do lot of development work in the village. As I said, there is different social group we call caste, rich and poor men and women disabled. And you know, so when there is some dispute, family dispute, within member or two family, they go and discuss and solve the problem. We feel this is very, you know, important activity, because when they solve this dispute, if one family go to court or police, you know there will be one person win and one person lose. And also mobilize local resources. Sometime they do development work without supporting from outside, like repairing footpath, you know, very small things which is important they are doing.

**Christy Kauffman**

You mentioned one example. But do you have a story of what are some things that a CBO has asked for? Or from a local government that they've been able to receive or do, do you have examples of what kind of things

**Surendra Shrestha**

local government, they are very interested to collaborate with us. You know, some years back, government is very reluctant to partner with INGO and NGO, but now they are very open, and they request for us, because with the small fund, we mobilize properly and finish project on time and quality work so government see that is why government want to work with these CBO sometimes government also offer project to CBO. Okay, we want to do some project in your community, because they see they are doing good work with a small fund. That's why they said and examples. Now there are many public

pond in Morang. Some ponds are not utilized. So group is requesting, we want to use this pond for fish farming.

**Christy Kauffman**

You were mentioning they'll go to a local government to ask for maybe access to public pond to do fish farming. And fish farming is something we explored with your staff in Morang district. What impact can fish farming have on a community based organization? What can that benefit them? Oh,

**Surendra Shrestha**

they learn to work together. Because sometime development project benefited only elite or rich people because they have a good connection. But when we are working with marginalized community, they come together to work together. That is also we need to increase that kind of social capital. They support each other, they trust each other. Then secondly, economic benefits. When there is fish farming from fish selling, they can earn cash in hand. When women are in our experience, economic empowerment is very important for women's dignified life. So when women group earn money, she get respect from even husband. You know, now she is only earning now she does not need to ask, you know, money for buying, you know, sugar or tea or dress for the children. Now she can decide, you know, from this income, I can spend, I would say, more dignified life. So economically benefits, not only women, but whole family will be benefit. But she can lead the world. Then third is when there is, you know, water, fish pond, so it is also environmentally sound. If the pond is dried, not utilized, then that is also not good. But if there is fish and water maintenance water table, then that is also good for environment. You know, aspects

**Christy Kauffman**

the woman that we talked to, who was the leader of that CBO, she was saying how they used the money from the fish farming to save together to have an emergency fund. And I was asking her a little bit about that, and like, how does it feel to have some safety in that? And that was a big deal for her to have that.

**Surendra Shrestha**

That is another good example. And another benefit is now they get fresh fish. Mostly, you know, we get fish from India and it is frozen. Taste is not tasty, you know, but if local community get fresh fish, that is also benefits for their health. So it also supply locally,

**Christy Kauffman**

are all of the projects that Sahas does through these community based organizations?

**Surendra Shrestha**

We have mostly CBOs, because we see project is limited, three years, five years, then when we phase out, we see group are not active, because after project finish, at least there is local organization, these people are local, it wont die you know., government, also. Giving priority. But government also want to work through such local groups, mobilize local people. Yeah,

**Christy Kauffman**

it's a very sustainable model to do development work and to work through these community based organizations. How many community based organizations has SAHAS helped establish over how many years?

**Surendra Shrestha**

We started, SAHAS started implementing project from 2000 from one funding partner. Now we have 37 community based NATO organization. There are many, 37 community based NATO organization. Under that there are many main committees and small community based organization, small and this is over 28 years

**Christy Kauffman**

as someone who has come from an agricultural background and grew up on a farm with the parents who farm, did your parents have anything like this to help support them when they when they're farmers? Or

**Surendra Shrestha**

no at that time, there was no NGO or other things they did traditional way. You know, we had a few buffalos, two ox

**Christy Kauffman**

so I'm curious what you think would be different if your parents, when you were growing up, if they had something like a CBO, what do you think would have been different in your farming community.

**Surendra Shrestha**

If they had the use, they could learn new technology, new knowledge, improve their practices. We also promote local innovation. We said farmers are also a scientist. Farmers also a teacher. We should not undermine them. They have also knowledge, but sometime their practice should be changed little bit so that their efficiency would be high. If there is CBS, they could get new skills and knowledge. Definitely they will increase their production and productivity more collective effort.

**Christy Kauffman**

How would it change the dynamics of the community?

**Surendra Shrestha**

As I said, you know, we need to change social structure in a positive way. We also use do no harm approach, because we also believe on peace. You know, MCC is very much belief on that. So we need to, you know, keep relationship with all but more focused and prioritized for marginalized community.

**Christy Kauffman**

There's definitely peace, a lot of peace building elements in your work in that community dynamic.

**Surendra Shrestha**

Yeah, sometimes we don't, you know, use in our report, because we focus on food and nutrition security. They are technical person, but we have been doing a lot of peace work. As I said, social

harmony, family Harmony, you know, gender relation. We believe in participatory even in the team. We always said we respect funding partner, because it is not easy to organize financial support. It is tough work, we do understand, but we also put community in the same level. You know, with the funding partner, we don't look community down and funding partner up. We look both, you know, up, because without community dedication, money is not enough, so we should respect them.

### **Christy Kauffman**

Thank you so much for sharing a bit about how you do your work, because I think it's an important sustainable development practice. So thank you for sharing that.

### **Christy Kauffman**

*Talking to Surendra, it was great to get back to some of the basics how MCC and its partners are working in communities. Working with local people to meet needs in a way that will last. Group of helping hands Nepal is creating sustainable community change through social capital, social capital is the value that is brought to a community through relationships. There is a whole community benefit to having people around you as a resource willing to help when you are in need.*

*Thanks for listening.*

*This episode of Relief, Development and Podcast was produced on the traditional land of the Algonquin, Lenape, Nanticoke, Piscataway, Shawnee and Susquehannock people groups. This episode was hosted and produced by me, Christy Kauffman. The head producer is Leslie Boctor.*

*Thanks and take good care.*