

# outcome HIGHLIGHTS



The mobilisation of the Dalit people led to rallies in which women played an important role.

Photo: Jagat Basnet

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## Land for Dalits

Supporting landless people in Nepal

### In brief

- This PAMS project played a crucial role in anchoring the rights of landless Dalits in the Nepalese government's interim constitution
- The project was exemplary in linking research and action
- Its outcome shows that a process of political transformation, such as that taking place in Nepal, offers unique opportunities for the socially disadvantaged to claim their rights



Research featured here was conducted in Nepal

### Bonded labour

The Dalits of Nepal are a marginalised group of people who have suffered systematic discrimination within the hierarchical social system; they were formerly regarded as “untouchable”. Many Dalits have no rights to land or other productive resources and are forced into bonded labour – a practice that, while illegal, is still widespread in remote rural areas of Nepal.

To meet their basic needs or to finance important ceremonies, they often have no option but to take loans from landlords in their neighbourhood. Referred to in Nepal as Haliya/Haruwa and Charuwa, they have to plough the landlords' land or graze their cattle to work off their debt. Since interest rates are extremely high, it often takes them years to repay the debt, during which time they have no way of improving their living conditions. The costs of illness, children's education or family celebrations lead to repeated loans and indebtedness, trapping the Haliya/Haruwa and Charuwa in a vicious cycle and further marginalising them.

An NCCR North-South PhD study on Dalits' access to land resources

offers valuable findings. To complement the research, a PAMS project was launched aimed at mobilising the Dalits, providing capacity building and leadership formation, and raising societal awareness. Its long-term goal was to establish a dialogue between Dalits and government representatives, with a view to enacting changes in land-related policies.

### Empowering Dalit people

The PAMS was conducted by a local NGO, the Community Self-Reliance Centre (CSRC), in collaboration with the Human and Natural Resources Studies Centre (HNRSC) of Kathmandu University (KU) and the NCCR North-South.

First, the CSRC organised a large mobilisation of the Dalits, bringing together more than 6,000 Haliya/Haruwa and Charuwa (over half of them women). Later, the participants were grouped into nine “camps” to disseminate information and plan further strategies and concrete action. Several round table discussions were held in various regions, enabling researchers, Dalits, politicians, and government representatives to assess the situation of Haliya/



The project enabled Dalit people to organise themselves into groups and, later, to meet government representatives.

Photo: Jagat Basnet

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Haruwa and Charuwa and develop concrete actions to secure their basic rights. The discussions were based on scientific research findings that supported the Dalits' claims. The organisers also prepared information material for broader dissemination: a quarterly bulletin, two booklets in Nepali entitled *Bhumi Adhikar* ("Land Rights"), and *Nasuniyeka Sworharu* ("Unheard Voices"), and an 18-minute video documentary, *The Suppressed Pains*, with English subtitles. They then distributed the material to the political parties, members of the interim parliament, and the National Planning Commission.

### Linking research and action

Several Dalit groups have since secured land rights and certificates of citizenship for their members. But perhaps the most important outcome of this PAMS project was its contribution to having the formal rights of landless Dalits enshrined in the interim constitution as well as in the government's three-year interim plan. This was made possible because several land-rights activists

who worked on the PAMS project were selected as members of the Constituent Assembly. One member, Shanta Chaudhari, was nominated Chair of the Parliamentary Committee on Natural Resources and Means. This outcome shows that a process of political transformation, such as that taking place in Nepal, offers unique opportunities for socially disadvantaged people to claim their rights.

This PAMS project was exemplary in linking research and action. The strong collaboration between the NCCR North-South, Kathmandu University, and CSRC contributed to a fruitful exchange of knowledge between research, advocacy, and policy. On the one hand, activists obtained research-based evidence to advocate for their land rights; on the other, the involved researchers gained first-hand perspectives of the people who are at the centre of the land debate. Including local government officials at every stage was key to the project's ability to influence policy at the national level.

### Researcher

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### Partners

- Human and Natural Resources Studies Centre (HNRSC), Kathmandu University, Nepal
- Community Self Reliance Centre (CSRC), Kathmandu, Nepal
- National Land Rights Forum, Nepal

### Further reading

Upreti BR, Sharma SR and Basnet J. 2008. *Land Politics and Conflict in Nepal: Realities and Potentials for Agrarian Transformation*. Kathmandu, Nepal: Community Self Reliance Centre, Human and Natural Resources Studies Centre, Kathmandu University and South Asia Regional Coordination Office of NCCR North-South

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Outcome Highlights feature effective collaborations between researchers, policymakers, practitioners, and local communities in the NCCR North-South network.

### Partnership Actions for Mitigating Syndromes (PAMS)

are pilot projects designed to test NCCR North-South research in real-world settings. Developed jointly by researchers and local stakeholders, they aim to promote mutual learning and reveal paths to sustainability.

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