



Partnering for Change: Link Research to Societal Challenges

Video Transcript

Making migration safer: setting up collaboration

[Prof. Dr. Susan Thieme] How do you set up a transdisciplinary project? How do you decide on its goals? There are many answers to these questions. In this video, you will discover how we did it in the case of Nepalese migrant workers in Delhi.

The project brought together many actors: an NGO, researchers, and the migrants themselves. Let me start with the research. For my PhD, I studied the general conditions governing Nepali migrants in Delhi.

How did social networks influence their access to work? How does the migration between Nepal and India impact their livelihood in the Indian city? How did they get work and necessities like shelter?

Migrants need money to migrate, to repay debt, or to send home. What are their possibilities to get credit, manage debts, and to save money for remittances? What role do social relations play in their daily lives? To answer all these questions, you need a transdisciplinary approach. And in fact, transdisciplinary collaboration was part of my PhD.

I did my PhD in the framework of the Swiss National Centre of Competence in Research North-South. This was a long-term programme dedicated to research on sustainable development and transdisciplinary approaches. It was financed by the Swiss National Science Foundation and the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation. This context encouraged me to introduce collaborations actively into my research.

Starting my PhD in 2001, I went to do fieldwork in Delhi in 2001 and 2002. There I got to know a group of young activists from Nepal and India. They assisted migrants from Nepal who were fighting for their rights. We started to collaborate.

Raju Bhattarai was one of the key persons for the cooperation. He and his colleagues had been active for quite some time. The possibility of cooperation, however, encouraged them to form an official organisation, the South Asia Study Center. Raju Bhattarai became the head of this NGO.

During my fieldwork in Delhi, I also interviewed Nepalese watchmen. They told me that in their families people had migrated over generations. However, within these families, the knowledge about the migration process was negligible.



Some of these watchmen were also very interested to learn how to advocate their rights. Thus, the first step in the transdisciplinary project was done. People started to collaborate. An NGO that could serve as partner had been founded.

A project obviously needs financial support. Knowing that my research programme funded transdisciplinary research, the South Asia Study Center and I developed a project proposal. It combined the NGO's practical expertise with the insights I had gained through my study.

Our project addressed Nepali migrants who mainly were employed as watchmen or domestic workers in Delhi. The project would provide training for these people. They would enhance their financial literacy and learn about labour rights. The project would also encourage watchmen to form an organisation in order to make their voices heard.

We developed the project idea jointly and wrote the proposal together. The South Asia Study Center drafted a proposal, and I finalised it, being a little more familiar with the proposal terminology of the research programme.

A lean structure would define our roles. As a researcher, I would provide scientific backstopping and follow the project closely. My own study would benefit from process and outcomes.

The South Asia Study Center in Delhi would implement the project. The NGO included students and activists, some of them coming originally from Nepal. Their existing close contacts to migrants in Delhi would facilitate the cooperation with them during the project.

Even if the South Asia Study Center would mainly be responsible for implementation, we brokered the project goals together. We also agreed that they would systematically document their work. In addition, they would provide a survey of the people who participated in the project, collecting migration-specific data. I could in turn use this data and documentation for my research.

The proposal was successful. We received 20'000 Swiss Francs for the first year. Then the project was evaluated and received an extension for another year. As an added benefit, the research programme allowed us to use its South Asia Regional Coordination Office in Nepal. There, Mr. Siddhi Manandhar managed all the financial issues as well as the auditing in the end.

Raju Bhattarai, the former head of the South Asia Study Center, is now living with his family in Canada. In May 2019, I interviewed him about the NGO. He also described the harsh working conditions Nepali faced in Delhi. You find excerpts from this interview in the PDF attached to this step. Please read them in order to get the broader picture.