



WLO interviews Garima Voyage 2021 WL International Innovation Prize Winner

Why did you choose the district of Sindhupalchowk for this project? How would you describe the local communities present in the area?

We did not choose that community and territory. It chose us. Our personal history developed together with the events in the territory. It is our community, of origin for Rabindra and of adoption for me. We grow affection for all the beauty of the area but also empathy for its shortcomings. We both promise in our lives, in different periods to contribute to the betterment of this world in the best of our capacity, to promote human dignity. And the opportunity to being able of even a little support this community, through tourism, would be the best to ask.

We are rewarded by a community that is one the most welcoming I ever experience in my several travels. They appreciate companionship and their curiosity brings together and closer even the closest and most introvert visitor. They are warm, kind, sharing and caring. But all this sweetness does not come without cost: their environment required them to be helpful to each other and share what they have because luck can change in a minute. We experienced it with the disastrous flood in June 2021. Many lost everything and without a strong community they risk to become poorer since government response is always delayed.

During every monsoon season they experienced risks and disasters and the difficult terrain made them profoundly resilient. They can endure anything. With the risk to become passive to it. The traditions and festivals they enjoyed are rich of meanings that it is privilege for anyone to experience them. The community in the area is diverse, various ethnic groups that tend to leave closely together but tolerance and religion respect is a must for everybody. Learning from them and live with them is an experience of beauty and richness. We would describe them with the adjective SIMPLE and AUTHENTIC but it might be reductive of their multiple aspects and variety.

One of the major objectives of the project is the development of the hosting community; can you elaborate on it?

We try to focus on SUSTAINABILITY, DIVERSIFICATION and CULTURAL strengthening. The lack of opportunities for rural communities in Nepal is a spread problem. To have some numbers: 68% of population rely on agriculture, but more than 50% have less than 0.5 hectare.

It is agriculture only for survival, with little productivity and this forces them to migrate and leave their ancestral territories to find economic opportunities. It leads to lack of care and work on territories that become prone to natural disaster and also ill-management of natural resources. Since youth and men are the majority leaving, this is a huge social problem for the most vulnerable groups such as women and also brings cultural impoverishment. By providing an additional source of income with tourism can support risk of relying only on one activity that is also so affected by climate change. Since it is sustainable can support better resource management and link tourism with other sectors: agriculture, local handicraft and products, cultural promotion, environment preservation contribute to 2030 Sustainable Development Goals, promoting those rural and mountainous communities.

Promoting Sustainable Trekking Tourism reinforces, in a virtuous circle, protecting, preserving and promoting fragility and authenticity of territories without major infrastructure (unsuitable on such terrain) since it becomes major attraction for visitors looking for this type of offer. Additionally, tourism can strengthen pride, cultural identity, enhance capacity, promote and protect traditions and this is a major factor in preserving authenticity of a community. We believe that this provide alternatives and support human dignity, happiness in communities, visitors and locals. It is not developing tourism but create alternatives to develop communities through tourism.

What has been the participation of the community in executing the project?

It has been enthusiastic since the beginning. Before implementing the project we use a double approach to be sure we have the endorsement from the most important sides: local communities and local authorities. We started with what we thought was the most difficult to convince: local authorities. But surprisingly we found them very receptive and supportive. They provide us various platforms to share ideas and coordinate interventions with CBOs, civil society and various institutions.

When we interface with local community we have and are experiencing a lot of hope and expectations. We are trying to balance them by providing training and assistance in order for them to manage independently such as guide or homestay. During the creation of trekking routes there have been cases of competition among villages because it is seen as a great opportunity for everybody. We have been able to manage this problem by informing and involving larger section of population and convincing them to focus first on the main network that can lead easily to numerous additional secondary routes with various attractions.

What do you think is the scope of the project, especially in the post-pandemic setting?

The scope of our project is to deliver a model of sustainable development through tourism by delivering at least in 3 fields:

- HOMESTAY CREATION AND IMPROVEMENT
- SKILL TRANSFER AND INCREASED KNOWLEDGE, CAPACITY BUILDING
- EXPAND THE NETWORK OF TREKKING ROUTES

This will expand the offer and also the services for visitors and reinforce benefit for the local community concretely and immediately. For this reason, we have an ambitious plan for 2022 together with academic institution of Italy and Nepal: implement SUSTAINABLE CERTIFICATION on our trekking routes and achieve it in 2024. This project will involve students, professors, researchers and expert in various fields and it will be a transactional effort towards recognizing tourism not only in its economic component but social, cultural and a key to promote human dignity and enjoy life at its fullest for those involved in the tourism "transaction": hosted and hosting community.