

## Reaching Out to the Untouchables

By Jet Damazo



Dalits are the poorest and most excluded group of people in Nepal

THEY ARE daily wage laborers. They hardly receive education or have access to basic social services. Many of them don't even have proper clothing or sandals for their feet. They are dalits – the poorest and most excluded group of people in Nepal – and they comprise 13% of the country's population of over 27 million.

"A strict caste system still exists in Nepal, and dalits - or the untouchables - are the lowest caste," explains Marzia Mongiorgi, an ADB Project Economist.

"They cannot even take water from the well because the higher castes do not allow them to touch the places they go to. These people are not just poor; they are disadvantaged economically, socially, and culturally."

As such, dalits hardly benefit from poverty reduction work and other forms of development assistance in Nepal. A project that offers livelihood training programs, for instance, would not benefit dalits as they cannot afford to

miss even a few hours of work.

"Attending a half-day training would mean not earning enough money to buy food for their children for that day," says Ms. Mongiorgi. "Therefore, even if we have development projects that target the 'poorest', these households are often left out."

This risks increasing the rich-poor gap and creating social disturbances, such as street protests and crime. Too much inequality, says Ms. Mongiorgi, can keep a country from progressing. Besides, a country will grow faster if everyone is a productive member of society, contributing to the growth of their village, and therefore of their nation.

To rectify the situation, a pilot project, funded by the Poverty Reduction Cooperation Fund, is trying to determine whether the conditional cash transfer (CCT) program will help improve the plight of these people.

CCT involves giving cash or in-kind incentives to households that fulfill certain conditions, such as sending their children to school or having them vaccinated. CCT has been successfully implemented in other developing countries, particularly in Latin America.

Under the ADB project, around a thousand dalit households in 20 poor villages will be given the equivalent of US\$350 over a period of two years, under the condition that their women participate in skills development workshops and other community activities.

"The \$350 is sufficient for basic needs, such as rice and clothing, and for capital to initiate an economic activity. That shows just how poor they are," says Ms. Mongiorgi.

A certain portion of the money will be allocated for livelihood protection, which means that the lost income resulting from the women not being able to work while undergoing training will be covered. The remaining money is for livelihood promotion, wherein household needs will be provided to ensure that they participate in the project's activities.

"Some of them do not have a proper sari or sandals, and so they are not confident enough to walk into village meetings. Others may not have a roof, and since the village meetings rotate among the households, we will provide roofs to those who need them," explains Ms. Mongiorgi.

The type of assistance and livelihood training workshops to be provided under the pilot project will all be determined based on the needs of the selected beneficiaries. Once the barriers to their participating from development projects are addressed, it is hoped that the quality of lives of these households will improve.

"We are not out to make these households rich; we are just making them less poor, so that they are able to participate in and benefit from regular development activities," says Ms. Mongiorgi. "We are making sure that as we work to reduce poverty in Nepal, they are not left behind." #