Title: “Empowering young Nepali girls through mountain hiking and environmental and cultural education”

Country: Nepal | University: Geneva Graduate Institute (IHEID) | Students (from the Geneva Graduate Institute): Emmeline Perreve (France) ; Eva Luvisotto (Switzerland) ; Maëlle Lécureuil - Project leader (France).

Title of the project: “Empowering young Nepali girls through mountain hiking and environmental and cultural education.”

Project summary:
Women and young girls in Nepal have long experienced high levels of inequalities and gender discrimination. In the 2022 Gender Inequality Index, Nepal ranked 96th out of 146 countries, with women and girls still lacking economic opportunities, being more illiterate than men, and facing other health inequalities. In an effort to address these gender inequalities, we have developed a project aimed at empowering disadvantaged Nepali girls who are passionate about preserving both Nepali culture and the natural environment. This project will provide a group of 12 to 15 girls with an immersive 10-day cultural, environmental and hiking experience in the Himalayan mountains and will be led by qualified Nepali female trekking guides and the well-established environmental NGO KEEP Nepal. Its mission is to inspire girls who share a passion for environmental and cultural learning and who seek to pursue careers that both preserve and enrich Nepal's rich socio-environmental heritage. In providing this experience, the project will deliver a long-lasting impact, encouraging girls to act in unity, creating bonds, and inspiring future female environmental change makers through companionship and education. It will ultimately establish their self-esteem and belief in themselves to achieve socio-economic independence, thus pertaining to the concept of positive peace. We believe that such a project would contribute to the general constitution of peace processes insofar as it would contribute to our definition of peace, i.e. a state of serene relations between citizens and local/international actors forming an inclusive, resilient, and non-violent society.

Local partner organizations and contact persons:
We have partnered with two Nepali Non-Governmental Organizations in developing this project: KEEP Nepal and Rising Lotus Children’s Village. Following our exchanges, they have confirmed the feasibility of the proposal of this project and expressed their support for its development and implementation. Both have reviewed and approved the proposal.

- **Kathmandu Environmental Education Project (KEEP)** (https://keepnepal.org/)
  **KEEP** is a non-profit non-governmental organization, established in 1992, whose mission is to ensure the future ecological and cultural prosperity of Nepal and its people by maximizing the benefits and reducing the negative impacts associated with tourism.

  **Contact persons**: Mr. Ian Wall, KEEP International CEO; Mr. Tara Datt Joshi, KEEP Manger; Ms. Anjila Poudel, Funding and Programme Research Associate ; Mr. Devi Prasad Panta, chairperson (nepalkeep@gmail.com)

- **Rising Lotus Children Village (RLCV)** (https://www.risinglotuschildrensvillage.org/)
  **RLCV** is non-profit children’s foundation committed to providing underprivileged Nepali girls with education and a nurturing home. They aim at empowering disadvantaged girls to become well-educated, self-sufficient members of Nepali society, thus breaking generation’s long cycles of poverty and gender inequality.

  **Contact person**: Nathanael Koehler, International Managing Director (nathanaelkoehler@gmail.com)

Student’s background:
Our initiative is rooted in our experience as young women, active in environmental and diversity projects, passionate about nature and hiking, and facing the fact that the mountain world is still too inaccessible to women all over the world. Women remain underrepresented and discouraged to engage in such sports and activities. In our studies in development, we are confronted with the abysmal inequalities that divide populations and societal groups. With this project, we aim at contributing to greater inclusiveness, equality and breaking down discriminations against women.

Contact of the project:
Nepal is one of the poorest countries in the world. Between 1996 and 2006, Nepal has been subject to a civil war, corruption, and poor governance that exacerbated poverty and pressure on minority groups. In this context, women and especially young girls continue to be marginalized and face discrimination. Although gender inequalities are decreasing in Nepal, girls continue to be less literate than boys, face economic participation and opportunities barriers, and continue to have a lower life expectancy than men. Women’s lack of opportunity is exemplified in Nepal’s trekking tourism industry where women continue to be under-represented in an industry largely dominated by men. Nepal’s economy relies heavily on the tourism industry, employing 11.5% of the workforce. Girls continue to be marginalized and face discrimination. Although gender inequalities are decreasing in Nepal, girls continue to be less literate than men, and facing other health inequalities.

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of total working Nepali’s, much of which stems from treks into the Himalayan mountains and culturally significant sites. Historically, since Nepal opened its borders in 1949, it has been the theater of a high number of Western mountaineering expeditions on the highest mountains in the world. Today, mountaineering tourism is still generating a significant contribution to Nepal’s GDP. However, this mass tourism continues to present pressures on Nepal’s natural environment, biodiversity and traditional cultures stemming from uninformed and irresponsible trekking expeditions.

Beneficiaries:
The beneficiaries of the project will be marginalized/disadvantaged young girls living in Nepal who have an interest in outdoor activities and/or environment and cultural education. A team of 15 public school girls will be selected with the support of RLCV and KEEP networks, using the following criteria: 1° age (between 13-16 years old); and 2° interest (for example, through a motivation letter). They will be accompanied by qualified female trekking guides, chaperones, and specialized environmental / cultural teachers.

Expected outcomes, short-term and long-term impacts:
1° Empowering young girls by allowing them to engage with the Nepali mountains, teaching them environmentally and culturally responsible trekking practices. Girls will get to know mountains, learn how to collaborate together in nature and how to sort things out on their own (independence, openness).

2° Reconnect with their surrounding nature and mountains by developing the participant’s awareness of human environmental impacts, especially on the Nepali mountains and what can be done to minimize them.

3° Creating bonds amongst young girls through collaboration, trekking together, and cooperative learning experiences.

4° Breaking down barriers that prevent girls from practicing mountain sports or accessing trekking careers.

5° Spread environmental awareness through an expert-led environmental awareness day supporting initiatives to create environmental clubs in Nepali public schools.

6° Facilitate long-term personal development or career in the field, e.g., by providing the tools and resources to apply for scholarships, introducing participants to companies hiring in the domain, etc.

Identified dilemmas and challenges:
We have identified three key challenges that will need to be addressed with particular care. First, it will be important to ensure that the process of selecting participants does not unfairly discriminate or cause unnecessary harm to those who are not selected. Second, the experience of participating in the project can potentially be physically and emotionally challenging; it will be important to ensure that the structures in place allow for the best possible support for participants. Finally, the link between short- and long-term goals will need to be strengthened to ensure that they are aligned in practice.

Practical information: The detailed temporary program elaborated by KEEP is accessible here.

When and where? A 10-day trip that includes environmental training and hiking, taking place the first two weeks of September 2023. The experience will begin in Nepal’s 2nd largest city, Pokhara, the hub for trekking in the Annapurna mountain range, then moving to the mountain village of Ghandruk. Ghandruk is situated in the Annapurna Conservation Area, easily accessible for children, with favorable hiking conditions in early September.

What?
- A day information session on environmental issues and concerns, focusing on culturally and environmentally responsible hiking in the Himalaya, given with the support of KEEP. This also involves a raising awareness as to the human impacts on the environment, ecosystem degradation, responsible trekking practices, respect for local cultures, as well as the ways to preserve mountains and landscapes.

- Engagement with the surrounding nature with a guide through our contact with local organizations. This includes 1° Hiking discovery in the Nepali mountains; 2° Cultural and environmental awareness-raising.

- Support for the creation of long-term environmental reflection through the creation of “environmental clubs” at local public schools.

With whom? The project will be carried out with the support of KEEP and RLCV via their staff and their school networks. While the environmental training will be carried out by KEEP, a qualified woman-led trekking agency will guide the young girls during the hiking.

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