

## Nepal after the shock

**Development Cooperation new style, that is where Betteke de Gaay Fortman stands for. Betteke de Gaay Fortman has been alternating for eight years between her family in the Netherlands and her Nepalese foundation for children with a disability. When the country was struck by a devastating earthquake in April she decided to come into action. A portret of an entrepreneur and development worker in one. 'I really want to try to change the world a bit'.**

It has been seven weeks since the heavy earthquake badly affected Nepal. The atmosphere in the Nepalese Kathmandu-valley is quite relaxed. People trying to sell jewels are leaning apathetically on the historical temple walls of the king's city Bkaktapur. 'You want look?' 'You like silver?' There are no tourists to sell their goods. The historical palace garden is completely abandoned. It is quite a miracle the Hindu temples and brick pagodes are still mainly intact. The surrounding houses and hotels are all in ruins. Here, grabbing in the debris, women wearing their kurta's are desperately looking for furniture. 'This was my room en over here was our kitchen', as a girl points at a big gaping hole, 'Now we have nothing left.'

Betteke de Gaay Fortman is the first one who follows the young girl through a frighteningly narrow passage into the ruins of the house. This characterizes the way the blonde Dutch woman moves in Nepal; without hesitation, as if it is her second home. As director of the development organization *Karuna Foundation*, the former entrepreneur has dedicated herself to Nepalese children with a disability for eight years. Now that the country has been struck by a devastating earthquake, she is here to see how she can support her foundation.

'I heard about the earthquake through a text message', De Gaay Fortman remembers. 'First there was only the shock and fear, you have no idea how bad the situation is.' From her home she tries to contact Deepak Raj Sapkota, the Nepalese director, with whom she built up Karuna. 'Fortunately he and his team members were unharmed. After that I did not hesitate, Karuna may not be an emergency relief organization, but this catastrophe required immediate action'. The 35 man strong Nepalese team gets a *go* to support wherever they can. De Gaay Fortman stays in the Netherlands and does what she is good in, networking and putting her organization in the spotlights.

Seven weeks after the big shock, seeing the situation with her own eyes, clearly touches her. 'Especially those with a disability are affected. There are some children with a disability who died because they were trapped at home and couldn't escape because of their disability when the tremors started.' At a local centre for people with a disability in Bhaktapur, Karuna distributes food and galvanized steel sheets. A teenager in a wheelchair, a girl with no arm, a blind lady; all are waiting in line.

The dusty alley behind the centre is turned into temporary shelters of galvanized steel sheet. De Gaay Fortman knocks on the door of a couple that has settled there since the beginning of the earthquake. Suman, a man in his forties with a growing disability and his wife are looking quite sad. 'After fifteen years of saving, I finally build my own house two years ago', he says. 'Now everything is gone, except for our 3000 euro debt.' His wife cries softly, De Gaay Fortman sighs: 'This disaster pulls people back into poverty. Their son can forget about going to college now.'



### **The Shakyshaky**

Switching between these different cultures is something this woman has in her blood. Growing up in Zambia the young Betteke was outside all day, climbed into trees and danced the *shakyshaky* with the local children like no other. 'We were going to a normal school with Zambian children, in my youth origin or color didn't play a role. That was up until the day I first noticed grown-ups who were nice to me, but talked down to my black friend. That has stuck with me ever since, the absurdity of inequality.'

It is with this background that De Gaay Fortman in 2007, while being the owner of a Spanish translation company, decides together with the entrepreneur René aan de Stegge to build up an organization. 'Our goal was clear: a better life for children with a disability and prevention of avoidable disabilities.' By doing this, Karuna has developed a model. Small communities get inspired to better organize themselves to provide services to children with a disability, pregnant women and new born babies in a much better way.

With this new development approach where support is not being given *to* the people but is being planned and implemented *with and by* the community. 'The community contributes financially, everyone participates', De Gaay Fortman explains with passion. A committee of community people guarantees that the children with a disability are not left at home but are a part of the community and go to school.

In the mountainous remote areas of Nepal this pioneering does not always go as planned. Soon after starting the project in a community, they made the painful decision to pull out from there. 'That is something an organization will rarely do', she knows from experience, 'hardly any organization recognizes something doesn't work.' Now that the project is running independently in eleven communities, it is clear that this entrepreneurial approach is successful. 'On top of that we have established strong relationships with the communities. For that reason we were the first who knew what the people needed after the tremors.'

'But the most beautiful thing', De Gaay Fortman says whilst looking at the people helping each other with rice and blankets, 'is to see how the children with a disability are being loved in these villages. They are no longer considered as a bad sign from the past. Instead, everybody is proud that they are going to school, participate in street theatre, that they are able to contribute to their families, by milking the goats, etc.' Her blue eyes twinkle even more: 'You can see that the attitude towards these children changes and that is what drives me, I don't want to start some loose projects, but try to move a stone in the river.'

### **Meeting with the Minister**

There wasn't love at first sight with Nepal. 'What a terrible country', was her first thought. 'I thought it was filthy, I wasn't able to read the signs and I couldn't understand the people at all.' In addition, the mother of three children, in the beginning always was reluctant to travel. 'I found it very hard to leave in the beginning. My stomach began to hurt weeks prior to leaving. But now Nepal is a second home to me. Although I won't say that I'm losing myself, I'm only here when I'm here.'

And when she is here, there is almost no time to think of home. In the morning she is visiting the debris of Bhaktapur, whilst in the afternoon she has a meeting in Kathmandu with the Dutch minister of development cooperation, Lilianne Ploumen, to draw her attention to the situation of children with a disability and their families. Before this meeting, she calls her second son to congratulate him with his birthday and manages to change her outfit in ten minutes to a modern interpretation of the kurta, a jeans legging with a knee long sky-blue dress on top.

This 'local touch' isn't just in her way of choosing her clothes, it also reflects the philosophy of the organization and the way Karuna supports those in need. And that is being recognized. 'Yes, it may be ironical and painful, but the earthquake has really increased the reputation of Karuna Foundation. As we are so deeply rooted in the communities, we were able to help them very effectively. We have a meeting with the Dutch minister and several big organizations are interested to collaborate with us.' Supported by the Dutch partners of the Alliance for Disability-inclusive Development (ADID), Karuna Foundation is getting extra money to support people with a disability who were affected by the earthquake.

### **Back in the Netherlands**

Back in the Netherlands, at a terrace in Amsterdam with tropical temperatures. De Gaay Fortman has recovered from her visit to Nepal but it has taken some time. 'I just wanted to crawl under a blanket.' These are the aftershocks of a trip to an area in crisis: 'Everywhere in Muiderberg where I saw green open fields I thought, hé that is a great place for temporary shelters.'

It is not that sure if De Gaay Fortman will return to her so beloved Nepal with the same frequency. Karuna Foundation is going to be governed by a local board with Nepalese people. Her role as director will be different and more from a distance. 'You have to recognize that at a certain moment you don't have that much added value anymore as a person from the West', the entrepreneur says. , 'Then time has come to build something new somewhere else again.'

Although that sounds confident, it is difficult for the 'mother of the organization' to let go. 'It feels the same as with your child, you give all you can and now you have to see if it will make it on its own'. But she is convinced the Nepalese people need space to solve their own problems. Would the blonde girl that danced the *shakysaky* in Zambia think the same thing about that? 'Maybe my ideas about how development should take place have changed over the years, but my ideals are still the same', she smiles while saying.

### **Nepal earthquake**

On April 25th Nepal was struck by devastating earthquakes. 8500 people lost their lives and at least 600.000 houses were destroyed. The relief phase is over and the time has come to start rebuilding Nepal. However the first challenge for the Nepalese is getting through the rain season in the best way possible.

### **Disabled people first**

Six Dutch organizations have joined forces for the inclusion of people with a disability in developing countries. Participants in the 'Alliance for Disabled-Inclusive Development' (ADID) are the Liliane Fonds, the Leprastichting, the Karuna Foundation, Light for the World, Enablement and the Dutch Coalition on Disability and Development (DCDD). The coalition is now giving extra attention to people with a disability in disastrous situations because those are affected the most in situations such as Nepal when it comes to catastrophes.