

Impacting live halfway around the world

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The people of Nepal spent the morning of April 25, 2015 like most other days. It was business as usual for Ujjwal Chapagain, an entrepreneur. He was presenting a business venture along with his wife to the villagers in the Tamang community of Chogau Village, located in the Kathmandu valley in Nepal.

In the middle of the conversation, an unexpected visitor stole the show – the ground began to shake, and the nearby houses began to tremble. The group ran to an open area of an agricultural field, curious to find out what was causing the ground to shake.

Chapagain and the group stopped in their tracks when they found the farmhouse that once stood in the field had crumbled into a heap of debris within several minutes.

“After an hour, I relaxed when I knew everyone (in my family) was safe, but we lost our house and spent a few days under a tent,” Chapagain said of that day.

What he and the people of Nepal experienced was the worst natural disaster to strike the country in over 80 years.

The April 25, 2015 earthquake was violent; it had a 7.8 magnitude that destroyed villages and cities, and killed nearly 10,000 people. Twenty thousand more sustained injuries from the initial earthquake and the 120 aftershocks that followed. The widespread devastation left millions homeless and without food, including many in the Chogau Village. The event made international news, and put Nepal in the spotlight not for the geography’s natural wonders, but for how destructive nature can be.

Halfway across the world in South Texas, Steven Lukefahr, an international rabbit production expert and professor in the animal and wildlife science department at Texas A&M University-Kingsville, saw the aftermath of the Nepal earthquake on the news. He immediately thought of a colleague of his — Ujjwal Chapagain.



Nepal Rabbit Farms

A man happily shows off a large rabbit in one of the rabbit farm hutches in Nepal. The rabbit farms of the Chogau and Tinpile villages of Nepal were supported by the Rotary Clubs of Kingsville after the April 25, 2015 earthquake devastated Nepal. (Photo courtesy of the Kingsville Noon Rotary Club)

The Rabbit Guy

Lukefahr, who has authored books about rabbit production and has overseen rabbit farm projects all over the world, had met Chapagain prior to the 2015 earthquake. He supported Chapagain with knowledge about rabbit farming, as Chapagain was (and still is) the managing director of the Himalayan Rabbit Farm in Nepal, which at the time was only a few years old.

Chapagain had already trained a few villagers prior to the disaster, and it seemed that rabbit farms would soon multiply throughout the region.

That plan was set back when the earthquake hit, and Chapagain's rabbit farm suffered the same fate as the farmhouse.

With his experience of working in 30 countries developing rabbit farms – including in Haiti, after that country's devastating earthquake in 2010 – Lukefahr saw an opportunity to help the people of Nepal. He emailed Chapagain.

“The people of Nepal lost so much at that time,” Lukefahr said in a recent interview. “Millions lost their homes, family members and way of life. Businesses were wiped out. I had an idea that I presented to Ujjwal, which was to create multiple rabbit farms in his village.”

“For this project, I was the technical support – I'm the rabbit guy,” Lukefahr added with a laugh.

Rabbit farms are ideal, Lukefahr said, because rabbits are efficient in various ways.

“Rabbit meat is a lean protein, and their fur can be stitched for garments and clothing,” he said. “They're great for farmers because well, they breed like rabbits – fast.”

From a few rabbits come many – and quickly.

In a rabbit farm of five females (called does) and one male (called a buck), nearly 100 rabbits can spawn within a year, Lukefahr said.

“A farmer can not only feed their own family with the rabbit meat, but also earn an income by selling rabbit meat and the other parts of the rabbit,” he said.

Chapagain liked the idea, and said rabbit farms possessed a great future prospect for Nepal.

“With the various nutritional benefits of rabbit meat, it has the great potential to address the burning issues of Nepal, like the food insecurity and malnutrition,” Chapagain said.

Within a few weeks of the earthquake, he and Lukefahr sketched out a plan for the project and identified farmers in Nepal.

“We wanted to move on this project as quickly as we could,” Lukefahr said.

And, with what seemed to be great timing within a dark timeline, a fellow TAMUK professor who was looking for an international project for a local organization approached Lukefahr to see if he knew of any up-and-coming projects.

Rotary International

Richard Hartwig, a professor of political science at TAMUK, is the director of international services for the Noon Rotary Club of Kingsville. In 2015, Hartwig was looking for a new international project for the club to sponsor, and decided to ask someone who had consulting experience with international projects – Lukefahr.

“I knew that Dr. Lukefahr would be able to point me in the right direction for a project, and that’s when he told me about the rabbit farms in Nepal and the relief that was needed,” Hartwig said. “This is an incredible success story, and this project is something that is sustainable.”

After receiving approval to go forward with funding the project, Hartwig moved quickly to gather the necessary funds.

For the project, \$10,000 was needed to cover training supplies, transportation, meals, supplies to create the hutches for the rabbits, and for the purchasing the rabbits. The project needed enough supplies to benefit 50 families from the Chogau village, along with the Tinpiple village. The project would be supervised by the Rotary Club of Tripureswor of Nepal.

First, Hartwig applied for a project grant through Rotary International, and received \$2,000 for the project. From there, other local Rotary Clubs joined in and contributed to the project to help reach the \$10,000 goal.

The money was raised through the grant and contributions from the Kingsville Noon Rotary Club, the Sunrise Rotary Club, the Rockport Rotary Club, the Burnet Rotary Club, the Corpus Christi South Side Rotary Club, and a private donation, Hartwig said.

“One of the good things about the Rotary Club is that local people can take initiative. We can do something that ends up helping 300 people in Nepal,” Hartwig said. “It takes a lot of collaboration, but it’s really quite an amazing operation.”

“It’s just amazing, what he (Chapagain) has done,” Hartwig said.

Success in Sustenance

Under the financial assistance of the Rotary Clubs of Kingsville, implementation from the Himalayan

Rabbit Farm, and technical assistance from Lukefahr, more than 300 Nepal villagers have directly benefitted from the rabbit farms project.

Rabbit farmers are now able to support their families, both nutritionally and financially, Chapagain said, which has changed the outlook of the community.

“We can see 20 to 40 rabbits in the cages of the small entrepreneurs, and they are consuming the meat and selling, which has become a source of income to manage for their child’s education and regular household expenses,” Chapagain said.

One of the beneficiaries of the project, Raj Kumar Tamang, has seen a positive change in his and his family’s lives through the rabbit farm. In a YouTube video created by the Himalayan Rabbit Farm, Tamang shared his experience of establishing his rabbit farm.

“We were worried about how to make a way for our daily living,” Tamang said in the video. “We took four days training and were supported with rabbits and material for hutch construction. Now, already we are seeing encouraging results from that.”

With the success of the pilot project, Hartwig said he has hopes that the Rotary Club of Kingsville can continue to support the project in Nepal by expanding to another village in need.

“It’s really astonishing, the amount of people who have been helped in this project, but hopefully we can help another community,” Hartwig said. “Development projects can be difficult, but this one has gone amazingly well.”