

Community Gönpa Education Initiative Nepal (CGEIN)



Community Monasteries as a Means for Promoting Equitable Access to Education in Nepal's Northern Communities

The Government of Nepal (GON) is committed to providing equitable access to education for all. Though much progress has been made in giving school-age children access to education, much remains to be done as highlighted in the joint Ministry of Education and UNESCO report on *Education for All National Review Report 2001-2015*.

Now that majority of (95% according to 2012 school census report of DOE and 78% as per 2011 survey report of CBS) the primary school age children are enrolled in school, one of the crucial challenges at present is how to reach the unreached--disadvantaged, marginalized, minority groups. The first requirement in reaching the unreached is to exactly identify the population, their whereabouts, and their needs. (MOE/UNESCO, 2015, p. 81)

Logic and consistent anecdotal accounts suggest that a significant percentage of difficult-to-reach children in the Northern sections of Nepal's provinces are novice monks and nuns in rural community monasteries, and children in the communities they serve. Most of these children come from profoundly economically impoverished families and have no access to academic education. Community monasteries, or gönpas, provide *de facto* economic relief to these historically Buddhist families by providing food, shelter, and basic religious training for children.

Though there are notable exceptions, most community gönpas are currently unable to offer scholastic training for their novices and the surrounding community children. Religious education in the community gönpas is generally limited to Bhotiya language, and to rituals performed for the community (Rigzen, 2004; Sherpa, 2012). The standard structure of K-12 education with multiple classrooms, multiple subject matter teachers, and little indigenous

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(in this case Buddhist) instruction is neither suitable nor sustainable for these communities.

Many rural gönpas are also struggling to survive. Most, or in some cases, all novice monks and nuns chose to leave monastic life and the community gönpa during adolescence, as they are free to do. Not only does this leave the gönpa without means for its continuation, it also leaves the youth who depart from the gönpa without any scholastic education.

The cultural and historical causes of decreasing novice retention in gönpas and the increasingly impoverished origins of gönpa novices in these communities are not directly reversible (Beach, 1990). Reasons include greater interconnectedness with the world beyond these communities, increasing difficulty of reliance on subsistence agriculture and animal husbandry, increasing importance of scholastic education, and educational and economic migration away from the communities (cf. Childs, 2004, Childs et al., 2014). What is potentially transformable is how community gönpas and the communities they serve approach local education, either in the pursuit of a monastic life, or life in the communities as students and lay practitioners.

Sheer quantity alone indicates the important role community gönpas currently play and can play in Nepal's Northern communities. A best estimate is that there are approximately 5,000 gönpas in Nepal (CERID, 2007). Only 2,179 were registered with GON as of 2015 (BPPMDC, 2015). Of that 5,000, 4,000 are estimated to be rural community gönpas with school-age novice monks and/or nuns.

Community Gönpa Education Initiative Nepal (CGEIN) is a non-profit organization registered with the Government of Nepal. CGEIN's sole purpose is to develop, provide, and sustain quality scholastic and supplementary indigenous dharma education to Nepal's rural gönpas and to the communities they serve. CGEIN collaborates with Nepal's central gönpas, and governmental and non-governmental organizations to achieve this.

Community Gönpa Education Initiative Nepal (CGEIN) believes that with assistance, Nepal's community gönpas will be capable of implementing and sustaining a carefully designed and staffed GON-certified education program for these communities, in addition to dharma training. This can be done with support and input from GON and the larger central gönpas, using CGEIN as the organizing, development, and implementation body. Community gönpas are an already existing trusted organizational resource in many of these isolated communities. The Initiative has the potential of reaching a significant percentage of the "unreachable" by providing access to equitable education via community gönpas.

The recent decision by GON's Councils of Ministers to endorse the Education Regulation and Enforcement of Education Act of 2073 localizes control of basic and secondary education at the village or municipal level. CGEIN intends to build on increased local control and management of education to help support rural gönpas and their communities in making positive decisions regarding their children's and youths' education. There is always a risk with localization, that historically underserved groups could be further marginalized from education. CGEIN is in a position to work for greater educational inclusion through the community gönpas--institutions

that are perceived as the ethical heart of these mountain communities.

Phase 1

CGEIN and the Nepal Buddhist Federation convened a working conference in November, 2017 that included the educational leadership of 40 gönpas (both central and community) representing all of Nepal's provinces. Participants were tasked with discussing and developing the broad guideline of an education program for Nepal's community gönpas. Khyentse Foundation provided supporting funds.

Phase 2

CGEIN is currently finalizing funding support for the second phase of the initiative, which is a national-level educational research study of rural gönpas and their communities. UNICEF/Nepal, Nepal Buddhist Federation, and Kathmandu University School of Education will be implementing partners with CGEIN in conducting the study. The study will use complementary survey and action research methods to achieve the following goals.

- To systematically describe and understand the educational and associated sociocultural and economic realities of Nepal's rural gönpas, and the communities they serve.
- To understand gönpa and community leaders' thinking on improving the education of novices and other community youth, and to incorporate that thinking into future educational planning and design.
- To assess the ability of rural gönpas and their communities, including the local governance structure, to accept and sustain a GON-certified education program that integrates scholastic education with dharma education.
- To make a case to gönpa and community leaders for future collaboration with CGEIN in the pilot education program aimed at increasing equitable educational access for gönpa novices and other community youth.
- To produce a report of use to governmental and non-governmental agencies for purposes of educational planning in support of access to equitable education in Nepal's Northern communities.

The study is an essential next step toward designing and sustaining an education program that is well adapted to local circumstances and meets the standards of GON's national education system. Without this targeted research it is impossible to design and sustain an effective education program in these isolated Himalayan communities.

Phase 3

Phase 3 will be the design and piloting of the education of the education program including supplementary materials development and training for teaching fellows. Drawing on the broad guidelines discussed during the Phase 1 working conference and the various findings and outcomes from the Phase 2 study, we tentatively expect the education program to have the following general characteristics.

- The curriculum content will integrate academic subjects with basic dharma knowledge, ethics, and practice.
- Teaching fellows from central gönpas will be trained by CGEIN and will staff the education program in the community gönpas using a field support model similar to that currently used by Teach for Nepal.
- The education program will follow GON guidelines and will be a government certified community school at the basic education level (grades 1-8).
- The classroom and curriculum will be multi-grade and multi-level, and will only require a team of two teachers to function, along with ongoing in-service field support.
- The program will promote active teaching/learning rather than emphasizing memorization.
- The program will provide instruction in three languages: Nepali, Tibetan/Bhotiya Bhasa, and English, possibly using the local language as a bridge language.
- The education program will be for both gönpa novices and non-monastic community youth.

CGEIN is dedicated to designing and sustaining an education program that is well adapted to the cultural heritage of Nepal's Northern Himalayan communities, while meeting the academic standards of Nepal's national education system. The children and youth of these communities are their future. Thus far they remain a significant portion of the "unreachable" school-aged children of concern in the 2015 MOE/UNESCO report on the status of the *Education for All* effort in Nepal. This initiative will, through education, also help sustain community gönpas, an important part of Nepal's cultural heritage as the birthplace of Buddha.

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