

## FIELD BULLETIN

# Chepangs' Struggle for Survival: Views from Makwanpur and Chitwan Districts<sup>1</sup>

### Background

The Chepang are one of Nepal's most disadvantaged indigenous groups and are classified under the 'highly marginalized' category on the basis of a set of socio-economic indicators, such as population size, language literacy rate, house type, landownership, occupation and access to higher education<sup>2</sup>. Although no longer a nomadic tribe, the Chepangs have largely preserved their unique tribal identity by maintaining their traditional knowledge system and continuing to practice animism. Their language, which they themselves call *Chyo-bang* (*Chyo* means hilltop and *Bang* stone), belongs to the Tibeto-Burman language family and is closely related to the speech of the Raute and Raji<sup>3</sup>, two other marginalized (endangered) communities of Nepal. The Chepang population totals around 50,000 (0.23% of Nepal's population)<sup>4</sup> and is scattered mainly across the districts of Chitwan (40%), Makwanpur (29%), Dhading (20%) and Gorkha (5%)<sup>5</sup> where the majority live in sheds made of tree branches (see photo). According to the recent Nepal Living Standard Survey, almost 90 percent of Chepangs live below the poverty line<sup>6</sup>, earning around 6,000 Nepali rupees per capita annually.



This Field Bulletin looks at the challenges of the Chepang community to sustain their traditional way of living in a rapidly changing Nepali society. It highlights some of the main obstacles Chepang people face in terms of accessing education services, livelihoods, development aid and participation in governance. The Field Bulletin describes some of the positive steps taken by the Government of Nepal (GoN) as well members of the Constituent Assembly (CA) to enhance marginalized groups' inclusion and participation in decision making processes. It concludes with recommendations that build on the suggestions provided by Chepangs themselves, during the course of this research.

### Weak Legal Framework and Non-implementation of Relevant Legislation

A general lack of indigenous nationalities' political representation, participation and consultation in the development of relevant legal frameworks, especially in relation to the use of natural resources, and the

<sup>1</sup> UNFCO Bharatpur interviewed local Chepang community members, I/NGOs staff members and Chepang activists in Chitwan and Makwanpur districts in July and August 2012.

<sup>2</sup> In 2004, the Nepal Federation of Indigenous Nationalities (NEFIN) classified the 59 indigenous nationalities legally recognized by the National Foundation for the Development of Indigenous Nationalities (NFDIN) Act of 2002 in five groups based on a set of socioeconomic indicators, including literacy rate, house type, landownership, occupation, language, population and access to higher education. These categories include 'endangered' (10), 'highly marginalized' (12), 'marginalized' (20), 'disadvantaged' (15) and 'advantaged' (2). More information available on: <http://www.nefin.org.np/list/Categorization-of-Indigenous-People-based-on-development-/5/95/6> and [http://himalaya.socanth.cam.ac.uk/collections/rarebooks/downloads/NFDIN\\_Introduction.pdf](http://himalaya.socanth.cam.ac.uk/collections/rarebooks/downloads/NFDIN_Introduction.pdf).

<sup>3</sup> Two unwritten languages spoken in western Nepal. UNESCO regards these two languages as severely endangered languages, whereas Chepang is in the list of vulnerable languages. For more information see UNESCO Atlas of the World's Languages in Danger: <http://www.unesco.org/culture/languages-atlas/index.php?hl=en&page=atlasmap>.

<sup>4</sup> See Central Bureau of Statistics (CBS) Census of 2001.

<sup>5</sup> National Census (Ethnicity/Caste), CBS 2001.

<sup>6</sup> <http://www.nefin.org.np/indigenous-nationalities/hill-in/34.html>.

weak implementation of related legislation has contributed to the vulnerability of the Chepang community, as well as many other marginalized communities in Nepal. Although both the Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA)<sup>7</sup> and the Interim Constitution (IC)<sup>8</sup> recognize the issue of indigenous nationalities and underscore the State's responsibility to establish the rights of all citizens to education, health, housing, employment and food sovereignty<sup>9</sup>, as well as to provide basic economic and social security, including land, to economically and socially backward classes<sup>10</sup>, visible changes on the ground have been slow in coming, particularly in connection to the Chepang community. For example, while the Government ratified ILO Convention 169 on the Rights of Indigenous and Tribal Peoples<sup>11</sup> and the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples<sup>12</sup>, translation of these international instruments into national policies, legislation and action plans remains 'work-in-progress' at best. Similarly, the National Foundation for the Development of Indigenous Nationalities (NDFIN) Act of 2002<sup>13</sup> and the Local Self-Governance Act<sup>14</sup>, the latter of which was enacted to devolve more power to local political bodies, including the authority to promote, preserve and protect indigenous nationalities' language, religion, culture and welfare, did not result in the anticipated enlarged participation in the decision making process by indigenous nationalities.

## Education, Just a Dream

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Another immediate cause of vulnerability for Chepangs is their lack of education. The Nepal Chepang Association (NCA)<sup>15</sup> reported that more than three quarters<sup>16</sup> of all Chepangs are illiterate<sup>17</sup> and that only one percent of Chepang women know how to read and write, compared to the national average of around 50 percent<sup>18</sup>. Until 2009, only two Chepangs had completed a Master's degree, 21 (four female) a higher secondary education and 127 (27 female) a School Leaving Certificate (grade ten)<sup>19</sup>.

The remoteness of Chepang settlements is regarded as one of the main reasons behind these low literacy rates. Most Chepang villages have only a primary school and students need to travel three to five hours every day, usually over sloped and difficult terrain, to attend secondary level schools. Due to a lack of financial means, few Chepang students can afford to stay in hostels closer to educational facilities. According to the director of a training institute in Chitwan, who has been working with Chepangs for several years<sup>20</sup>, the construction of secondary level schools in Chepang populated areas should be given priority by both the Government and development organizations. Moreover, even though secondary education is officially free in government schools, some School Management Committees are said to collect fees<sup>21</sup>, making higher education unaffordable to most Chepang students. Among those few who complete higher secondary level, fewer yet continue on to further courses of study. The afore-mentioned director further noted that Chepangs do not attend preparatory classes for university level education because they live far away from tuition centres and consequently lack confidence to take the university entrance exams.

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<sup>7</sup> Articles 3.5 and 3.9; <http://reliefweb.int/report/nepal/full-text-comprehensive-peace-agreement-held-between-government-nepal-and-communist>

<sup>8</sup> Available at: <http://www.nic.gov.np/download/interim-constitution.pdf>.

<sup>9</sup> Article 33(h), the Interim Constitution of Nepal (2007).

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>11</sup> Please refer to: <http://www.ilo.org/indigenous/lang-en/index.htm>.

<sup>12</sup> Please refer to: [http://www.un.org/esa/socdev/unpfii/documents/DRIPS\\_en.pdf](http://www.un.org/esa/socdev/unpfii/documents/DRIPS_en.pdf).

<sup>13</sup> For more information please refer to: [www.nefin.org.np/list/About-NEFIN/4/0/13](http://www.nefin.org.np/list/About-NEFIN/4/0/13).

<sup>14</sup> Please refer to: [http://www.mld.gov.np/pdf\\_downloadable\\_file/local\\_self\\_governance\\_act\\_2055%281999%29\\_english.pdf](http://www.mld.gov.np/pdf_downloadable_file/local_self_governance_act_2055%281999%29_english.pdf).

<sup>15</sup> Please refer to: <http://www.ncachepang.org.np>.

<sup>16</sup> Whilst disaggregated results of the 2011 Census are not yet available, and with few and discrepant figures presented in various research papers, statistics related to literacy rates among Chepangs should be taken as approximate indications.

<sup>17</sup> Source: CBS national census 2001; national average for illiteracy for 15 years and above is 48.6%; 62.7% for male, 34.0% for female.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>19</sup> World Vision Advocacy Forum (WVAF) Nepal, Supporting Marginalized Chepang Ethnic Community through Enhanced District Chepang Rights Forum, 2009.

<sup>20</sup> Interviewed on 16 August 2012.

<sup>21</sup> Interview with the Chairperson of Srijanshil Youth Society in Manohari, Makwanpur, on 3 July 2012.

A general lack of awareness of the importance of education among Chepang parents and the high prevalence of illiteracy also constitute a big obstacle for the education of their children. Faced with serious challenges in maintaining their livelihoods (see below), many Chepang parents take their children out of school to help with household, agricultural and wage work<sup>22</sup>. As a result, the dropout rate is very high among Chepang school children<sup>23</sup>.

“Projects should be designed and implemented based on our traditional skills, knowledge, art and culture with an awareness raising component to the community people for the improvement of their livelihoods”

*Founding member Nepal Chepang Association*

## Livelihood Challenges

### Lack of Land Ownership Certificates:

Originally nomadic, Chepangs used to survive through hunting, fishing and collecting edible roots and shoots from local forests. Most of the land suitable for crop cultivation was consequently occupied by more sedentary communities, and Chepangs were compelled to settle in sloped, arid and stony areas. Furthermore, the Private Forest Nationalization Act 1957 included all forest land that had previously been used under customary systems of rights and usage under the category of ‘government ownership’. There was no compensation for highly marginalized indigenous groups such as the Chepangs who had traditionally managed and used these forests. Non-recognition and the lack of legal protection of customary land rights have slowly eroded their access to areas they traditionally used for their livelihoods.

### Fragile geology and steep topography make Nepal one of the most disaster prone countries in the world:

Nepal ranks 20<sup>th</sup> on risk for all kind of natural disasters and 30<sup>th</sup> for risk of floods in the world<sup>24</sup>. Out of Nepal’s 75 districts, Makwanpur is the most vulnerable, ranking first on vulnerability to landslides<sup>25</sup>. Moreover, Chepangs’ unavoidable practice of shifting cultivation increases soil exposure in steep and sloped terrains, causing erosion that might thereafter lead to landslides. In a landslide that took place in Makwanpur District in 2002, more than 60 people were killed and almost 500 families from eight different VDCs displaced<sup>26</sup>. In Kandada VDC, a local Chepang described the incident as follows: “I managed to escape the landslide along with my 12 family members, but I lost a building, ten cattle, one bigha [0.6 acres] of land and 200,000 Rupees in cash. Unfortunately, my brother along with his 18 member family was swept away by the landslide and only his four year old son survived<sup>27</sup>”.

Nowadays, most Chepangs are subsistence farmers and their economy is based on forest resources and shifting cultivation<sup>28</sup>; their only means of survival as they do not own productive land<sup>29</sup>. “We do not own land because we lack citizenship certificates required for land ownership”, said local Chepangs in Makwanpur<sup>30</sup>. A member of the NCA further noted that almost half of Chepang households have been denied registration certificates for land they have cultivated for centuries<sup>31</sup> and that, in 2005, still two-thirds of the Chepang population was considered landless<sup>32</sup>.

### Food Insecurity:

Chepangs mainly grow maize and millet and given that much of the land they cultivate is on degraded and sloped terrain, yields are low and hardly sufficient to cover basic dietary needs for even six months, rendering

<sup>22</sup> Interview with local Chepang community members in Rangsirang VDC-8, Makwanpur, on 3 July 2012.

<sup>23</sup> Interview with a Field Coordinator of Plan Nepal in Manohari, Makwanpur, on 3 July 2012.

<sup>24</sup> UNDP/Bureau for Crisis Prevention & Recovery-BCPR, 2004 and World Bank 2005.

<sup>25</sup> District Vulnerability Mapping: DesInventar Database-NSET 1971-2008.

<sup>26</sup> The VDCs are Kankada, Raksirang, Sarikhet, Dandakharka, Bharta, Khairang, Kalikatar and Namtar.

<sup>27</sup> Interview with Ganesh Chepang, Kankada VDC-4, Makwanpur, on 30 June 2011.

<sup>28</sup> Shifting cultivation is an agricultural system in which plots of land are cultivated temporarily, and then abandoned. Under this system, Chepangs cultivate pieces of land for 3 to 5 years, after which the productivity of the land appears to decrease considerably. Thereafter, Chepangs move to new areas for cultivation looking for a more productive land.

<sup>29</sup> Interview with a Field Coordinator of Plan Nepal in Manohari, Makwanpur, on 3 July 2012.

<sup>30</sup> Lack of citizenship certificates further prevents them from receiving government loans, from accessing banking services, from receiving old age security allowances and from voting among other services. Interview with local Chepang community members in Rangsirang VDC-8, Makwanpur, on 3 July 2012.

<sup>31</sup> Central member of Nepal Chepang Association interviewed on 3 August 2012.

<sup>32</sup> Sixth National Chepang Assembly, Chitwan Declaration, September 2005.

the population food insecure for the remaining half of the year from March to July<sup>33</sup>. To supplement their diet, they rely on edible roots of wild forest vegetables, such as yam. According to the World Food Program (WFP), this year's maize production is estimated to have decreased by 30-40% in comparison to last year (2011). Chepangs interviewed in Makwanpur shared, "This year crops will last less than three months due to a long drought and late monsoon. We do not know how we are going to survive and feed our families the rest of the year"<sup>34</sup>. A WFP staff member explained that in order to cope with the lack of food some Chepang adults eat just half a meal and provide the rest to their children, and if the situation is critical they eat only once every other day.

Many Chepangs are compelled to seek jobs as wage laborers at construction sites in either Nepal or India to be able to sustain themselves and their families throughout the year<sup>35</sup>. However, these jobs are not easy to secure, as there are many farmers looking for jobs during the agricultural off-season in an already limited labor market<sup>36</sup>. The scarce job opportunities available at construction sites are limited to major cities and local market centers along the highways in Makwanpur and Chitwan. Reaching these places usually involves long hours of walk from most Chepangs' homes. Due to extreme poverty, Chepangs usually cannot afford to travel overseas in search of jobs, for example to Gulf countries, as some other Nepalis may.

### Development Aid for Charity or Empowerment?

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Several development organizations<sup>37</sup> have focused their activities on improving the livelihood of the Chepang over the past decade. Stakeholders<sup>38</sup> interviewed agree that some improvements in livelihood have been observed, but that the pace is very slow. However, as a staff member of one of these organizations puts it "Development activities for Chepangs have been highly relief-oriented rather than building capacity and empowering them to improve their indigenous skills and technology. As a result, they are over dependent on development projects"<sup>39</sup>. A United Nations Development Programme report of 2009 stated that highly marginalized indigenous groups, such as Chepangs, have little or no voice in 'modern' decision-making and governance structures and therefore remain marginalized, vulnerable and largely excluded from mainstream development efforts at both national and local levels<sup>40</sup>.

For some the problem lies in Chepangs' lack of ownership of the development projects targeting them, and insist that these projects must be reframed in such a way that community members can participate more actively in each and every activity<sup>41</sup>. Other voices, including Chepangs themselves, acknowledge that there were instances of "benefit capturing" and a diversion of development projects for self-interest by Chepangs close to party leaders and government staff<sup>42</sup>. Another NGO worker argued that service providers are not making enough effort to reach the neediest and poorest Chepangs, who usually live in difficult to access areas<sup>43</sup>. High duplication due to a lack of coordination among different service providers was also mentioned as an obstacle to overcome<sup>44</sup> and development practitioners and government staff interviewed<sup>45</sup> acknowledged that joint planning, implementation and monitoring could minimize duplication, strengthen coordination and improve the effectiveness of targeting certain groups<sup>46</sup>. Some Chepangs interviewed

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<sup>33</sup> Interview with World Food Programme (WFP) staff in Makwanpur on 5 July 2012.

<sup>34</sup> Interview with local Chepang community members in Rangsirang VDC-8, Makwanpur, on 3 July 2012.

<sup>35</sup> Member of the monitoring committee of the People's Housing Programme interviewed in Chitwan, on 16 August 2012.

<sup>36</sup> Interview with local Chepang community members in Rangsirang VDC-8, Makwanpur, on 3 July 2012.

<sup>37</sup> Plan Nepal, People's Housing Programme (GoN project), the Center for Community Development Nepal, Makwanpur Development Institute and Nepal Chepang Association among others.

<sup>38</sup> Plan Nepal, the Center for Community Development Nepal and Nepal Chepang Association.

<sup>39</sup> Interview with staff of the Center for Community Development Nepal (CCDN) in Makwanpur, on 4 July 2012.

<sup>40</sup> *Communication for Empowerment in Nepal: An Assessment of Communication and Media Needs Among Indigenous Peoples*. Kathmandu: UNDP 2009. [www.undp.org/oslocentre/docs10/NepalC4EReport2010Final.pdf](http://www.undp.org/oslocentre/docs10/NepalC4EReport2010Final.pdf)

<sup>41</sup> Member of the monitoring committee of the People's Housing Programme interviewed in Chitwan, on 16 August 2012.

<sup>42</sup> Interview with local Chepang community members in Rangsirang VDC-8, Makwanpur, on 3 July, with staff of Plan Nepal in Makwanpur on 4 July 2012, with a member of the monitoring committee of the People's Housing Programme in Chitwan on 16 August 2012.

<sup>43</sup> Interview with a Chepang field technician of Plan Nepal, Makwanpur, 4 July 2012.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>45</sup> Interview with staff of Plan Nepal and the Center for Community Development Nepal (CCDN) in Makwanpur, on 4 July 2012, and with a member of the monitoring committee of the People's Housing Programme in Chitwan, on 16 August 2012.

<sup>46</sup> Interview with a District Development Committee staff who is a focal person for the Chepang Development Programme, Makwanpur, 5 July 2012.

complained that local leaders and development workers were targeting poor Chepangs not out of genuine motivation to empower them and make them self-reliant, but just to show it in their programmes proposals<sup>47</sup>. "We have been fighting for our greater rights for a long time and yet the government and different organizations have responded with small development programmes rather than empowering us by giving opportunities to be part of the political and government system", concluded a member of the NCA<sup>48</sup>.

## Chepang Autonomous Region Proposed for Federal Nepal

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Unlike some other indigenous groups that have openly expressed their views on federalism<sup>49</sup>, most Chepangs have not been very politically active and vocal. However, some Chepang community leaders interviewed who were keenly aware of the topic stated that "Nepal needs a new system that will listen to and address the grievances of the most marginalized communities and federalism is our last hope. We do not want charity from anyone, but a system to empower us so that we can be part of decision making processes and the state machinery"<sup>50</sup>.

Chepangs are highly concentrated in 29 VDCs of the four earlier mentioned districts which are divided across three administrative regions<sup>51</sup>. The 11 province majority model proposed by the State Restructuring Commission in February 2012<sup>52</sup> divided these four districts across three potential provinces (Tamsaling, Narayani and Tamuwan). "This division will weaken the strength of the Chepang community in a future federal system"<sup>53</sup> noted local Chepang leaders in Chitwan and Makwanpur "We are not demanding a separate province, but advocate for an autonomous region comprising the 29 VDCs"<sup>54</sup>. A local field worker<sup>55</sup>, with longstanding experience in Chepang issues, also noted that the areas in which Chepangs reside could be clustered in a special autonomous region in order to best guarantee their rights. Interviewed members of the NCA mentioned that self-rule was important for exercising control over ownership of land and territory, promotion of economic, social and cultural rights and being able to set their own development priorities.

## Positive steps

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The GoN has taken some positive steps towards a greater inclusion and participation of marginalized group in decision making processes. In 2002, it formed the NFDIN to coordinate the overall development of indigenous nationalities by formulating and implementing programmes related to their social, educational, economic and cultural development. Moreover, one of the key policies adopted in the government's national three-year plan (2010-13)<sup>56</sup> is to expand the participation of indigenous people and other excluded groups in all walks of national life and the various organs of state. In addition, the plan aims to improve proportional representation of marginalized groups.

The Public Service Ordinance, promulgated by the Government in February 2009, requires public service sectors including Nepal Army, Armed Police Force, development committees, health service, local development bodies and community schools to allot at least 32 percent for indigenous nationalities while recruiting new positions<sup>57</sup>.

The Ministry of Local Development has issued directives to all districts to form indigenous nationalities District Coordination Committees to create a forum that would enable indigenous people to influence

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<sup>47</sup> Interview with local Chepang community members in Rangsirang VDC-8, Makwanpur, on 3 July 2012.

<sup>48</sup> Interviewed in Chitwan, on 4 June 2012.

<sup>49</sup> Indigenous groups such as the Limbu, Tamang, Tharu and Sherpa.

<sup>50</sup> Group discussion with community leaders in Rangsirang VDC-8 of Makwanpur, on 3 July 2012.

<sup>51</sup> Chitwan and Makwanpur are located in the Narayani Zone. Dhading is part of the Bagmati Zone. Gorkha lies in Gandaki Zone.

<sup>52</sup> On 31 January, two reports were submitted to the Government of Nepal State Restructuring Commission, one proposing an 11-province federal model (majority report) based on ethnicity and language, and another 6-province federal model (minority report) based on geography and viability.

<sup>53</sup> Group discussion with Chepang leaders in Makwanpur, on 3 August 2012.

<sup>54</sup> Interviewed on 3 and 16 August respectively.

<sup>55</sup> Interviewed in Chitwan, on 16 August.

<sup>56</sup> Available at: <http://www.npc.gov.np/uploads/publications/20110901113819.pdf>.

<sup>57</sup> Report for Durban Review Conference. Available at: <http://www.dfnepal.org/publications.php>.

district-level decisions over the distribution of local resources. In a related policy measure, 15 percent of the government block grant provided to districts is to be used for disadvantaged groups<sup>58</sup>.

The indigenous peoples' caucus that was formed during the now dissolved Constituent Assembly (CA) tenure also provided an opportunity to intensify demands and negotiations for policies and legal instruments for more inclusive participation and development of these groups.

## Conclusions

The crisis that Chepangs are currently experiencing finds its roots in an overall socio-economic, cultural and political marginalization and discrimination, resulting in low access to education, services and employment. Chepang communities feel impoverished and exploited, and have often been compelled to discontinue their traditional ritual practices. The lack of protective laws, land titles, policies and regulations to ensure traditional and alternative livelihood opportunities, in effective implementation of relevant pieces of legislation and high levels of illiteracy have put the Chepang's traditional lifestyle under severe strain<sup>59</sup>.

Much research has focused on Chepangs over the last 20 years, including studies of their indigenous knowledge, use of traditional resources, and living conditions. However, these efforts appear to be limited to documenting realities and stop short of making recommendations on a course of supportive action<sup>60</sup>. The various stakeholders, including Chepangs, interviewed in Chitwan and Makwanpur, mentioned the need to develop economically and environmentally viable income generating activities<sup>61</sup>, which should center on expanding and extending the indigenous skills of the Chepangs into capacities that meet new niches. For example, support to develop rural tourism and home stays in or nearby Chepang villages could increase local employment of youths and promote small businesses. Equally strongly, a new generation of Chepangs wants something other than charity – a more inclusive governance system that offers the opportunity for greater political participation in state institutions and in decision-making processes that affect their lives.

Further delay in the process of inclusion and participation may further fuel dissatisfaction not only among highly endangered groups but also amongst other indigenous nationalities. Moreover, the government's failure to implement existing legislation erodes confidence in the State and can contribute to a continued sense of exclusion from the State by such groups.

**Disclaimer:** This field bulletin is prepared following a brief field study and also uses secondary data. The information presented in this field bulletin does not imply official endorsement or acceptance by the United Nations. Although the RCHCO aims to confirm all information independently, occasional factual inaccuracies can occur.

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<sup>58</sup> As part of the Local Self-Governance Act, available at:

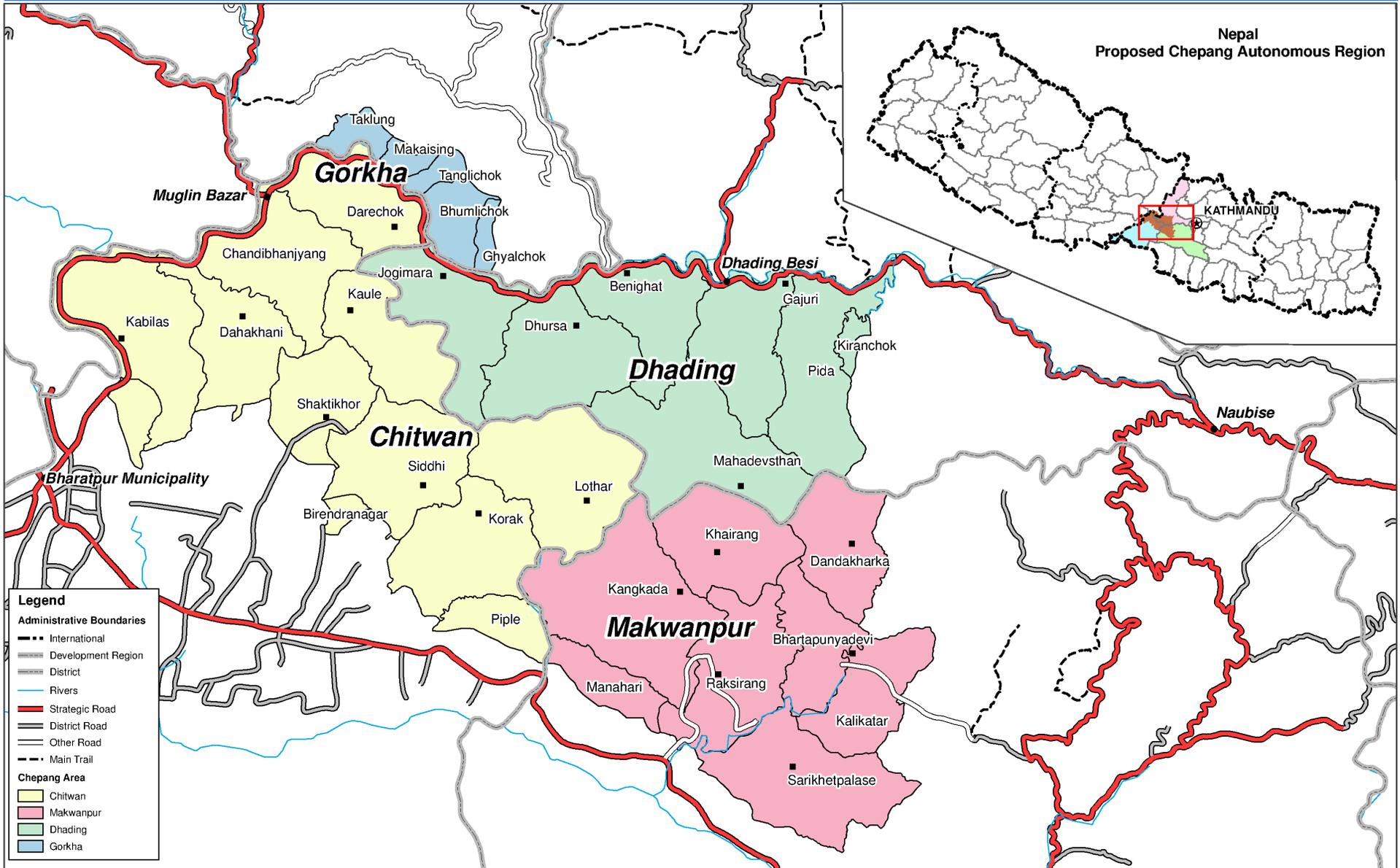
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<sup>59</sup> A Case Study on Marginalized Indigenous Communities' Access to Natural Resources in Nepal. International Conference on Agrarian Reform and Rural Development. Available at: [http://www.icarrd.org/en/icard\\_doc\\_down/case\\_nepal.pdf](http://www.icarrd.org/en/icard_doc_down/case_nepal.pdf).

<sup>60</sup> A founding member of the Nepal Chepang Association interviewed in Chitwan on 4 June 2012.

<sup>61</sup> Planting bamboo, groom grass, jack fruits and other economically valued grass species and trees, bamboo crafting, fish net weaving, agro forestry, bee hive and pig farming were mentioned.

# NEPAL - Proposed Chepang Autonomous Region



**Legend**

**Administrative Boundaries**

- International
- Development Region
- District
- Rivers
- Strategic Road
- District Road
- Other Road
- Main Trail

**Chepang Area**

- Chitwan
- Makwanpur
- Dhading
- Gorkha



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