

Terre des hommes' Magazine Courage



Nepal
**On the field
of hope**





Reporting in Nepal

Poverty, isolation, separation from parents... With Terre des hommes, the football field becomes a safe haven for children.



A word with

Ajay Tamang, a dedicated football coach for the *Sport for Protection* project.



♥ Thank you for acting alongside us!

Thank you for your solidarity with children around the world, throughout the year! Thanks to every donation, every bequest, every hour of volunteering and every partnership, millions of children can look forward to a better future. Because every child in the world has the right to be a child. It's that simple.

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Terre des hommes
 Helping children worldwide.



“Fatalism has no place here.”

International news often focuses on Nepal solely for its Himalayan peaks. Yet, far from the public eye, a very different story is unfolding today, set to the rhythm of the footsteps of those who leave their home.

Driven by the urgent need to provide for their loved ones, millions of Nepalese are leaving their mountain villages to brave the scorching construction sites of the Gulf or to seek a future in the hustle and bustle of Kathmandu. Amidst the turmoil of this exodus, children grow up in a state of perpetual uprooting: shuttled from village to city or having to live with their grandparents.

I am intimately familiar with this sense of uprooting. As a child, I changed schools nine times to follow my parents. Through these moves, I came into contact with a wide variety of communities and witnessed, with outrage, the social exclusion deeply entrenched in our social system. Once I understood this, I had no doubts: I committed myself to contributing to social justice!

Today, I am proud to present Terre des hommes' work in the rural, mountainous district of Sindhupalchok. Every week, about a hundred children come together around a football as part of the *Sport for Protection* initiative. On the field, social hierarchies fade away, but the programme goes far beyond the game: it raises children's awareness of their rights, addresses the violence they may face and, step by step, reaches out to families to identify and prevent situations of risk.

Although change is gradual in Nepal, it is very real. I see laws being strengthened and child marriages being prevented. These victories remind us that fatalism has no place here: what we sow is not in vain! Our work aims to help children reach for their dreams, to show them that yes, they can achieve them. Together, we give them the strength to stand up for themselves and to build, with their own hands, the future of Nepal.

Rusha Adhikari
Child Protection and
Migration Project Manager

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Nepal : *on the field of hope*

Protecting children, one match at a time

What becomes of a child whose parents work miles away to support the family? How can a child thrive when their social identity forbids them from playing with others? In Nepal, it is this daily life devoid of hope or guidance that robs too many children of their childhood. Yet in Sindhupalchok, a simple ball is turning these rules on their head. Thanks to Terre des hommes' *Sport for Protection* initiative, the football field erases distance and social hierarchies.



In the village of Helambu, even the peaks of the Himalayas can hear Ritu's confident voice. The player, in a blue jersey, asked to speak publicly after playing in a football tournament organised by Terre des hommes (Tdh): *"It doesn't matter if we lost the final, we're not going to get discouraged!"* Behind her, a gentle breeze stirs the colourful garlands of Buddhist prayer flags and pushes back the clouds to reveal glimpses of the majestic mountain slopes. The blue sky seems to caress the natural terrace on which the football field has found its place.

We are far, very far, from the setting of the grand stadiums that children dream of. Here, the field is bumpy, and the lines are roughly marked out with feet or using cones. The grass, where it grows, is yellowed and worn. But one couldn't care less about the quality of the turf or the final score. We just want to make the most of the chance to play and listen to Ritu's heartfelt speech: *"My friends and I have always wanted to play football, but we'd never had the chance."*

All our lives, we thought we'd never be able to play: having had this chance has made me truly happy, from the bottom of my heart!"

Did you know?
Every year, Tdh supports over

20'000



children and youth worldwide through Sport for Protection initiative

Without the *Sport for Protection* initiative launched by Tdh in October 2024 in the Sindhupalchok district, Ritu would never have been able to wear such a jersey or speak so openly in public. How could she have imagined this growing up here? The region, close to the Chinese border, is certainly beautiful. But above all, it is so isolated, so rugged, so forgotten. In Helambu, without this project which provides a field and moments of carefree fun, many children would see their aspirations and dreams dashed.

What if football could bring people together?

"It's undeniable: sport helps us grow and live better together!" says Maria Bray, migration and psychosocial manager at Tdh. *"Sport tackles societal barriers with incredible gentleness,"* she explains. Around the field, the shared enthusiasm brings all generations together. A rare and precious occurrence in Nepal: football even manages to draw fathers to the touchline, men who are usually so difficult to involve in these programmes. Seeing them cheer on their children creates an invaluable family bond. Above all, the rules of the game become rules for life. Learning to communicate, to support each other to score a goal, or to overcome a defeat... *"All these small sporting victories build their strength of character for real life,"* concludes Maria. *"They realize that they have the right to lean on one another, and that together, no mountain is insurmountable."*



Using sport as a shield

It is on this very field, put up by Tdh, that we meet Ajita. As an Inclusive Sports Officer, she dedicates herself every week to reminding the children that they have a future: *"We don't just support them; we also show them how to stand up for their rights and believe in their dreams.."* Whilst the project is aimed at everyone, it strikes a particular chord with young girls, who are often kept away from football by social norms or a lack of sporting opportunities. During training sessions, a name is sometimes heard echoing across the field, whispered with admiration: 'Samba'. This is the nickname of Sabitra Bhandari, the international star of Nepal's women's team. As Ajita points out: *"She proves to them that anything is possible. She started out playing with makeshift balls in her village and travelled a long, winding road before playing in Europe."*

In this region, children are sorely lacking in role models with whom they can identify. All too often, their future seems predetermined: child marriage, a patch of land to cultivate just to survive, or migrate to Kathmandu and abroad to take on gruelling jobs. As Khagendra Dhungana, an Inclusive Sports Officer, points out, *"Poverty remains the common denominator behind*

these forced departures. Added to this are traditional ways of life where parents do not take the time to listen to their children. At home, many also suffer physical and psychological abuse."

Did you know?
Every year, more than

2 million

Nepalese leave the country to work abroad



With no safety net, their rights are often violated, exposing them to serious dangers. To break this cycle without clashing head-on with traditions, a universal language had to be found. This is where football comes in. On the field, it's all about sport: the children run, pass the ball, shoot and laugh. Nothing but pure, simple joy. That is the strength of the *Sport for Protection initiative*: using the joy of sport to build trust. For Khagendra, *"football is a way to reach children and talk to them about social issues."*

After training, the pace slows down. The children form a circle and sit cross-legged in the shade of the trees. Every week, Khagendra and Ajita organise study circles to tackle topics that are sometimes complex, but always using simple language:



the risks of unsafe migration, child marriage, the risks of child labour... *"We draw parallels between the field and daily life so that they can absorb the information we want to share with them. For example, just as teamwork is essential in football, we help the children understand that collective support is necessary to make migration safe and dignified."*

These weekly sports sessions and study circles also create an opportunity for open discussions between girls and boys. For Ramila, aged 14, this was a completely new experience: *"Before, I didn't dare go near the boys; I was shy, but now that I've been playing with them, it doesn't bother me anymore."* And the change goes both ways: *"They're changing too: before, they used to say we shouldn't play together because we weren't strong enough. Now they congratulate us on our progress."*

↪ **Ramila, in the center, surrounded with her two best friends from football training.**





When sport speaks louder than disability

Having suffered severe burns to her legs as a child, Karishma struggles to walk and sit. A disability that isolated her for a long time, as Khagendra recalls: *"During the first session, she stayed at the back of the room, looking away... so alone and so silent."* But the field changed everything. Despite her mother's fears, Karishma was determined to play: *"Mum, I only have one life"*. Thanks to sport and Khagendra's sessions, her isolation has vanished. *"The sessions have helped her gain confidence"*, says Khagendra happily. *"Now she is more confident and always surrounded by friends."* A change confirmed by the young girl: *"Before, I didn't dare take part in anything. Now, I've grown closer to others."* Bolstered by this newfound confidence, Karishma looks to the future with ambition: she dreams of becoming a teacher!

But time ticks on, the session ends, and the children and youth eventually gather their things. As soon as Ramila leaves the pitch, the light-heartedness of the game evaporates and the weight of daily life takes over again. From Helambu, where she goes to school, Ramila has to walk for an hour to reach her home, perched on a hill. She lives there alone with her father because her mother has been working in Kuwait for six months. She knows she won't see her again for another two years. *"I miss her so much,"* says the young girl, who is usually so reserved. *"If I could make a wish, just one, it would be for her to come back and live at home!"* she admits, with tears in her eyes.

Her mother's departure weighs heavily on her, turning her daily life upside down: *"Now I'm the one who does the cooking, and on Sundays I help dad in the fields. At the moment, we're growing maize."* School isn't talked about much at home. *"The teachers tell me she's doing well,"* her father says proudly. *"I don't know anything about it; I didn't go to school, so I think she should go as far as*

she can. And if she wants to be a doctor or a pilot, I'll always encourage her."

Ajita witnesses this family heartbreak and these isolated living conditions every day. To ensure the children are supported beyond the sports field, she doesn't hesitate to walk for up to two hours through the mountains to visit families and assess risky situations within their homes. *"That's the difficult part of my job,"* she admits. *"But it's so much more powerful to meet the families in person."* During these visits, she discusses positive parenting. It's an exhausting effort, but one whose rewards are immeasurable: *"I can actually see behaviours improving. After these sessions, abuse within the family eventually disappears."*



Did you know?

79%

of children in Nepal experience violent discipline

Finding their voice

Though the interlude of the game eventually gives way to a difficult daily life, the most important thing lies elsewhere: Ramila has forged unshakeable self-confidence. A transformation that brings a smile to Ajay's face, her coach: *"When she joined the group, she was so shy... Today, you could almost say she's chatty!"* And this confidence extends far beyond the field, following her right into the classroom. *"Before, I didn't dare ask the teachers anything for fear of being told off,"* says the teenager. *"Now I know I'm allowed not to understand, so I don't hesitate anymore."* As the afternoon draws to a close, the wind blows across the hill and the sun is already bathing the other side of the mountain. The air is turning cooler, but Ramila's smile warms hearts as she talks about her sessions with Tdh.

"My best memory is when we won the spring tournament. It was so much fun lifting the cup together! Since then, I've promised myself I'll never miss a training session again!"

Ramila, 14 years old



"I've learnt the weight of words and the power of my voice. I speak less because I think before I speak."

Samod, on the right, next to his grandma



It is at the end of a long, winding road, climbing through the mountains, that we meet young Samod. Cheerful and brimming with a confidence rare for a 14-year-old, this young boy already dreams of becoming a famous actor or politician. Yet in Thangpaldhap, a village perched on the ridges four hours' drive from Kathmandu, the future rarely promises the limelight. Although he was initially sceptical about sharing the football field with girls – a revolution in this deeply traditional region – he quickly cast aside his prejudices to take on the role that fits him like a glove: that of captain.

Far from his parents, who have gone elsewhere to work to support the family, Samod and his two brothers live with their grandparents, worn down by the weight of a hard life. From five o'clock in the morning, Samod takes charge: he lights the fire, prepares food for the cow and the buffalo, before setting off on an hour-and-a-half walk to school. But this burden does not crush him; on the contrary, it seems to fuel his strength of character.

Football training has had a transformative effect on him. Once consumed by frustrations linked to his family's instability, Samod has learnt to channel his energy. His grandmother, her back bent under the branches she has just gathered, watches him with a relieved smile.



"I find he gets angry far less than before."

Chyama, Samod's grandmother

The boy confirms this with disarming maturity: *"I've learnt the weight of words and the power of my voice. I speak less because I think before I speak."* When he puts on his jersey, he is no longer a young man subjected to his circumstances, but a leader who runs, encourages and positions his teammates.

Samod proclaims his dreams of greatness loud and clear: *"Being born poor is not a mistake. A farmer's son doesn't have to stay one: if he believes in himself, he can become whatever he wants!"* Ambitions that leave his grandmother speechless. Sitting on the hard-packed earth, she admits her helplessness in the face of this life force: *"He loves us and we love him, but we don't know how to support him beyond that."* Here, survival often leaves no room for children's dreams.

Never mind. Samod now has enough confidence for his whole family. As he gazes at the horizon from the steep slopes of his village, the impenetrable Himalayan range rises before him. Immense. But it no longer crushes him. Thanks to all the self-confidence he has built up over the last few months and the support of his friends, he



Samod (on the right) looking after his younger brother (bottom left) along with his bestfriend from football practice (top left).

knows he will be able to shape his future. Samod has realised the strength of a group and the power of his dreams.

He now knows he has the right to believe in his destiny.

Marc Nouaux

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A word with

Ajay Tamang, “Coach Ajay”



Ajay Tamang, aged 24 and originally from the Sindhupalchok district, grew up in the exact same conditions as the children he now supports with Tdh. Today, as a football coach for the *Sport for Protection* initiative, he offers them what he never had access to and proudly observes the changes in each and every one of them.

How did you become a football coach, and why did you join the development sector?

I am self-taught; I never had a coach when I was young. I know the importance of having a guide, and that is why I wanted to help the children in my village. I was living in Kathmandu and looking for work when I saw an advert at the local municipality for a coaching position. I felt it was a great opportunity because, without this project, I probably would have left to work abroad to make a living. This work has allowed me to stay close to my family.

What difference do you see compared to your own childhood spent in the region?

Ten years ago, when I was the age of the children I coach, I had never even seen football boots! We played barefoot or in slippers, with damaged balls or ones made out of socks! We used to tell ourselves: ‘If Pelé* could play barefoot, so can we.’ I tell the children today that they must make the most of their good facilities and such beautiful shirts. If this project had existed for my generation, I would have become an international player! *[laughs]*

**Pelé was a Brazilian football legend in the 1960s and 1970s.*

The children admire you and listen to you. How do you feel about their difficult daily lives?

I will do everything I can for them! Recently, I found out that a 13-year-old girl who was part of our community had married. I was truly sad and devastated; the news affected me deeply. At the time, I couldn’t even think about anything else. We also encounter less severe, but equally real situations: one of the children from our community had stopped playing because his football boots were too small. As his family couldn’t afford to buy new ones, I offered to get them for him because I didn’t want him to stop playing.

The project has been running for over a year now. What do you think its greatest impact has been?

In the beginning, the boys and girls were generally shy and scared of interacting with one another. They were even afraid to hold hands during games! Today, they relate to each other as equals, speak openly, laugh, and play together without any distinction. But this project has changed me too: I used to be a very quiet person, and I have evolved alongside them. They give me energy!

Interview by Sneha Shakya

“If I hadn’t been able to help the children in my village, I probably would have left to work abroad.”







Your donation can save lives!

Every gift you make is a step alongside children, to protect their rights and their well-being. Together, let's make our mission a reality: to give children the means to have a happier childhood and build a better future.

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