

December 2020 Sustained Grantee Spotlight: BlinkNow Foundation (Nepal)

As the COVID-19 pandemic threatened the Kopila Valley of Nepal, the crises came like falling dominoes. BlinkNow Foundation's co-founder Maggie Doyne said the organization and those it serves battled back.

"When COVID-19 first hit Nepal, like everywhere there was a lot of fear and confusion and panic," Doyne said. "I think our role originally was to make sure we were getting accurate information to our beneficiaries."

That started with debunking rumors – like the belief that ash on the forehead could provide protection from the virus – and moved to provide evidence-based information.

"We really needed to talk about hand hygiene and screening for fevers and making sure the virus didn't spread," she said.

Very quickly, Nepal locked down its border with India.

"A lot of the country's GDP comes from migrant work," Doyne said. "Migrant work looks like millions of people going into India to pick mangoes or build roads or dig ditches – mostly manual labor – or work in the back of hotels. Daily wage labor is how our world's poor make their daily wage. You work on a labor site for a dollar a day, two dollars a day. You bring that money home and buy your vegetables or your rice and beans that your family eats to survive, and maybe pay the rent. All of that work shut down for two to three weeks."

There were immediate mass food security issues. Doyne said Nepal already faced food deficits because of its Himalayan geography, migrant work force, and daily wage work. This was magnified at the time the pandemic hit because it was in between growing seasons and subsistence farmers already faced the prospect of famine.

"It was an absolute nightmare disaster," she said.

BlinkNow had to close its school and women's center temporarily, but the work did not stop.

"Our women's center women instantly started making PPE," Doyne said. "We had hundreds of women trained in weaving and sewing. They were able to immediately pivot to sewing masks and gowns. They were getting paid work. They were able to fill the gap and make some income. It was really beautiful that they had the skills and were ready to go."

BlinkNow supported the efforts by moving sewing machines where they were needed and making sure their beneficiaries had fabric.

Because the school and women's center had to pause in-person programs, social workers and counselors stayed in contact with students and women to check on their mental health. They were also provided with emergency food kits.

"We pivoted to a food bank system and developed a distance learning program," Doyne said.

Because internet access was not available, the information was distributed in packets. This created challenges because though the students can read and write, nearly 90 percent of the women cannot. The women were also supported through counseling, family services, and referrals to alcohol support services, in response to concerns about an increase in gender-based violence during the lockdown.

“We’ve seen that up close and personal, a major surge,” Doyne said.

Several months into the pandemic, another crisis emerged when Nepalese workers began crossing back into Nepal as COVID-19 cases in India increased.

“They were swimming across rivers, walking hundreds of kilometers,” Doyne said. “No buses could go pick them up, and a lot of these people had to get to rural Himalayan villages that would take days to walk to.”

BlinkNow was at the center of the crisis as the nearby population of about 800,000 had 700,000 unemployed. As a politically neutral organization, BlinkNow was able to bring people and organizations together to face the disaster. It was dubbed the Welcome Home campaign.

“People needed water immediately, food immediately, safe transportation immediately,” Doyne said. “Then they had to go into quarantine for two weeks before they could go into their rural villages.”

Closed schools were used for quarantine centers.

“It was about bringing dignity back to the migrant workforce that is responsible for 30 percent of the country’s GDP and this entire region’s livelihood,” she said. “They are literally carrying the economy on their backs, even though they are often seen as unhuman.”

Ultimately, hundreds of food and water stations were established. Women and children were able to have safe, separate locations for quarantine, and people were able to have safe transportation. Though Doyne is currently in Canada, BlinkNow’s Nepali team has child and community safety as its primary focus, still providing distance learning, working to protect the mental health of women who have lost their community connection, and fighting the loss of progress in areas such as child marriage. It is a challenge for an organization whose model is bringing women together in person, but the work continues.

“It’s been a nightmare, but we’re making progress,” Doyne said.