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INTERVIEW

January 2021

## **Shaping Transformation. Stronger. Together.: Strong performance – Strong commitment to work on ecological transformation**

- **Interview with Dr. Prem Bahadur Thapa, President of the  
Nepal Permaculture Group (NPG)**

**BIOFACH / VIVANESS 2021 eSPECIAL will be held from 17 – 19 February. In addition to exhibitor presentations and diverse opportunities for networking and virtual meet-ups, the eSPECIAL will offer all participants the comprehensive, deeply knowledgeable programme of the BIOFACH and VIVANESS Conference. The main theme for BIOFACH 2021: Shaping Transformation. Stronger. Together. The main focus: how diverse social movements – and the organic food industry – can achieve their goals better by acting together.**

In the fifth and final part of the interview series on the BIOFACH 2021 eSPECIAL congress focus in the BIOFACH Newsroom ([www.biofach.de/en/news](http://www.biofach.de/en/news)), we spoke with Dr. Prem Bahadur Thapa, President of the Nepal Permaculture Group. Nepal has been undergoing a slow transformation process toward organic agriculture and a sustainable society for nearly 30 years, fueled and supported by the NPG (Nepal Permaculture Group) and its encouraging team. In this interview, the president of NPG, Dr. Prem Bahadur Thapa, gave us insights into the work and successes of NPG and talked about the mission, goals and challenges of the transformation process.

The interview was conducted by Karin Heinze, BiO Reporter International

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**Permaculture Group (NPG) was established in 1992. What were the motivations and the driving forces?**

Dr. Prem Thapa: As a farmer's son, born in a small village, I had some basic knowledge and interest in traditional farming with the mobilisation of local resources. After my graduation in agriculture, I started a job with the Government of Nepal in my early twenties as an Agriculture Officer and it was my job to teach farmers who are mostly much more experienced than me in the work on the fields. During that time the Government was very believing in the advantage of high external input of chemical fertilizers and pesticides, which was also taught to me at the university. The official focus was on production, production, production and didn't care about soil health, old knowledge, proven technologies and practices in the traditional way of farming. But I recognized that some very experienced farmers didn't follow the new system but remained in their proven, successful way of traditional farming that was environment friendly and much more sustainable. At that time I got the chance to attend a Permaculture Design Course by Bill Mollison, the „Father of Permaculture“ from Australia. We learned so much about this holistic sustainable approach and recognized permaculture as an alternative system that fits much more with local resources than the methods with chemical fertilizers and pesticides, including also social aspects. The enthusiasm for the ideas of permaculture and the insight that many farmers and likeminded professionals had, brought us to the decision to establish the Nepal Permaculture Group (NPG) in 1992. I was the president and one of the founding members.

**How did you get the Government on your side?**

Dr. Prem Thapa: Apart from teaching farmers we also tried to influence the Government as they are the responsible for policy, showing them that permaculture is the better way to farm in Nepal. It was for sure very hard to convince them as they trusted in chemicals. NPG was against chemicals at all and wanted to initiate alternatives like organic agriculture system in different parts of the society. Finally, we founded NPG legally as an association under the rules of the Government to get more recognition. Then we facilitated a series of discussions with national level policy stakeholders and organised a big international conference with Bill Mollison to show the politicians the benefits of permaculture. After that, we gave a



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lot of trainings for permaculture and organic agriculture and were able to include more and more farmers and professionals in the system. The fact that the farmers' and their families' health was declining at that time – e.g. more than 30% suffered from cancer in some of the parts like Panchkhal, Kavre where heavy chemicals and insecticides and pesticides were being used – damages by chemicals to the surroundings and to the water was an eye-opener for policy makers. We approached officials, professionals and farmers on different levels and it really was a long way to go. But it was worth it! The first years were hard but after around seven years a boom started and today we have more than 1,100 members at NPG. The members vary from professionals to farmers and policy makers in Nepal.

We also came up with a basic organic standard during this time. Now there is a high-level committee to develop a strategy how Nepal could go forward with sustainable organic agriculture. I am also a member of this committee. The Government including other stakeholders take many efforts in organic and permaculture. For example, we have the province Karnali in Western Nepal which has the status of an organic state. Also, a couple of municipalities/palikas declared themselves organic as they have limited access to chemicals and thus by default practice organic. But parallel to that, our Government is still promoting the conventional farming system with high level efforts in terms of financial and other resources.

**Does NPG only address agricultural issues or are there also other kind of transformation goals?**

Dr. Prem Thapa: Nepal is an agriculture-based country and our society is based on it too. There are a number of positive aspects in our traditional way of living which are sustainable, environment friendly, fair and social. The conventional system on the contrary only focuses on maximizing production not regarding any local context or social issues. Permaculture is not only about agriculture, you see, it is a holistic system that takes into consideration the organic cultivation of land as well as food sovereignty, climate protection, the ethics of the rural society or renewable energy. Permaculture is about designing positive aspects of three different systems; Natural, Traditional and Scientific with a number of associated principles. As written in our standards, our vision is a sustainable and



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self-reliant human society without poverty. Our goal is to network and build alliances with like-minded organizations and spread the philosophy of a sustainable future.

**Were you able to achieve your mission goals and a transformation of agricultural practices during these almost 30 years of work?**

Dr. Prem Thapa: We are satisfied with our achievements. Farmers, institutions and the government are listening to us and asking for our expertise in organic agriculture – there are policy strategies in this field, which we appreciate. But we have some challenges with the implementation at the operational level. There is still a gap. We are going to continue to work on that and will try to resolve the problems in future. We would be happy to impress more youngsters with permaculture philosophy. There is a certain trend visible, to go back to the countryside and to practice a more healthy lifestyle. That is influenced by the pandemic, too, I guess. Not only in the rural areas we find followers of the permaculture design, also people in the cities are now in favor of gardening this way in their rooftop gardens. Also the idea to start an organic business, a café, delivery service etc. is gaining ground.

**How deep is the philosophy of permaculture connected with the organic movement and its ideas?**

Dr. Prem Thapa: Organic is very connected to Permaculture in our understanding and one of the main components in the design of the system. The cultivation of the land is of course without any chemicals for soil and plants. In the Permaculture guiding manual we have more than 20 different principles. To make these principles operational there is a strong link to organic. For permaculture there are no legal rules like we have for the organic standards that can be controlled, certified and labelled on the product if an “organic legislation“ is implemented in a country. At NPG we have a checklist for good agricultural practice. The organic movement has been established for more than 20 years and there is a National Level Organic Certification Body and a number of organic inspectors with whom we also network.



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**The international Organic movement has grown out of the niche – is NPG collaborating with organic organizations (e.g. IFOAM) or other groups (Agroecology, Regenerative) to aim to a global eco transformation?**

Dr. Prem Thapa: We have very strong connections with IFOAM, NPG has been a member since its establishment. In 2010, we organized an international conference where we invited also representatives of the organization. Also in the following years there has often been discussions between the associations and actually now we are working together in designing the Nepalese organic standards. We also have an international network on permaculture, e.g. International Permaculture Convergence (IPC), Permaculture Association Britain (PAB) in the UK and more networks around the world. We organize so called conversions regularly for exchange and discussion. We are also a member in many like-minded organizations because we really think it is very important to network, collaborate, exchange knowledge, respect each other to reach our common goals. Without network you cannot make things happen and cannot achieve much.

**Do you think the Covid-19 pandemic is an eye-opener for many people in terms of other current crises like climate change, water scarcity and soil degradation?**

Dr. Prem Thapa: It is for sure an eye-opener for many and the pandemic shows that there is no other option than to make our lifestyle more sustainable. As most of the young people have been moving abroad for temporary employment and the agriculture in the country has been neglected. Now some of the young people have returned back and started agriculture in a professional way. We really need to act and help our planet! This is my belief.

#### **About Dr. Prem Bahadur Thapa**

Dr. Prem Bahadur Thapa is the President of Nepal Permaculture Group/NPG. This organization is a national network and umbrella organization on Permaculture and Sustainable Agriculture, [www.npg.org.np](http://www.npg.org.np). Dr. Thapa is also the Chairperson of Resource and Change Management/RCM Nepal, a company working on strategic



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planning, environment, governance, organic agriculture and enabling local governments for organic fertilizer promotion. He is an activist on Permaculture and Organic Agriculture and expert on Sociology, Environment and Permaculture

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