

## *WORKING IN REMOTE AREAS OF TIBET*

When an open-door policy was implemented in China, new forms of international co-operation became possible. Remote areas that are home to people of various ethnic backgrounds have been able to take advantage of new forms of support, thanks to the joint efforts of local communities, governmental and non-governmental organisations within China, and international NGOs. Joint efforts can be instrumental both in preserving the precious cultural heritage and in promoting local development.

For several years now, Eco Himal has been operating in collaboration with Tibet Assistance to Remote Areas (TARA), a Lhasa-based department of the Federation of Industry and Commerce, working to develop micro-projects in the remoter areas of Tibet. These are territories where the management of health, education and cultural restoration represent major challenges to local communities and administrations.

Local people are particularly keen on projects relating to education. Often there will be a government school in the main township, where Tibetan, Chinese and mathematics are taught at an elementary level. However, the population is scattered over large areas, making it difficult for many of the children to attend school in town. Numerous villages and nomad settlements have no school at all, or have managed to build only a very small and rough school using their own means.

In areas with no school facilities at all, villagers dream of being able to offer their children a service which they themselves never had, but whose importance they understand. They are willing to donate their own labour if they can be given help to meet the expenses of buying the construction materials. Maintenance of school buildings also requires attention. Sometimes windows and doorframes have not been fitted; desks and furnishings are often makeshift, and teaching materials have long since run out.

Through Eco Himal, sponsorships by individuals or groups have raised money to serve as seed investment which is then increased by government funding. Some donations come from schools where teachers and pupils have asked for an exchange relationship that allows children in Europe to learn more about geography, history and human society, at the same time providing a practical way to demonstrate their support for children of the same age who live in a fascinating but demanding environment.

Eco Himal assists in the management of several small schools. Most of these are located in the neighbourhood of Mt. Everest/Cholmolungma or in the Porong area, the plateau to the east of Mt. Shisha Pangma at an average elevation of 4,700 m. above sea level. These are high, windswept regions traditionally populated by Tibetan nomads. Recently, Porong has suffered from changing climatic conditions which have led to great hardships. Springs have dried up, the soil has grown increasingly arid and there have been periodic fodder shortages.

Together with officials of TARA and the local administrators, Eco Himal has initiated various projects, ranging from long-term research into the quality of grass and the problem of overgrazing, to small projects in health and education. Central here are the small schools built in the nomadic settlements. These schools generally offer only the first three primary classes – giving children the chance to become literate and numerate, without separating them from their families. Requests for small village schools of this kind come especially from local parents. All that is required are the building materials, since labour is donated by the community itself. The schools are also provided with a flock of sheep, which helps to cover the running costs by selling wool, etc. as well as supplying protein for meals at the school canteen. Long-distance adoption of a sheep for the school flocks has now become a practical proposition for children and other would-be sponsors in Europe – a different type of Christmas gift, or a gesture of generosity for a birthday or a similar occasion.

– *Maria Antonia Sironi, Eco Himal Italia*